



<div>  <div> Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS THURSDAY — 16 DEC 2021 </div>  </div>			
	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	12/16 Omicron upends pandemic rules 12/16 South Africa record daily Covid cases 12/16 Sweden extends Covid restriction rules 12/16 British surge seen as warning on omicron 12/16 Rising frustration China virus restrictions 12/16 Japan PM: will not attend Beijing Olympics 12/16 Super typhoon slams into Philippines 12/15 Japan stopped Covid dead in its tracks 12/15 EU: omicron likely accelerate death rate 12/15 Canada warns against non-essential travel 12/15 Britain's dire estimate daily omicron cases 12/15 Britain breaks daily record new virus cases 12/15 Study: omicron replication, transmissibility 12/15 SKorea bans social gatherings of 5 or more 12/15 Russia, China leaders laud close ties 12/15 Ukraine urges EU sanctions on Russia 12/15 Ukraine military in long odds against Russia 12/15 Nations renew talks on 'killer robots'	12/16 Double coronavirus surge: omicron spreads 12/16 Sports leagues face rapidly rising outbreaks 12/15 Flu 'steady' comeback amid rise in Covid 12/15 Colleges again thwarted seeking normalcy 12/15 Pandemic traumatized health care workers 12/15 Patchwork: health worker vaccine mandate 12/15 US: highest known virus death toll in world 12/15 Boosters strong protection against omicron 12/15 CDC: first Covid testing kits had design flaw 12/15 Storm system unprecedented Midwest Dec. 12/15 Tornadoes, high winds sweep central states 12/15 Effects of climate change on tornadoes? 12/15 Deadly tornado outbreak by the numbers 12/15 Some Kentucky towns no power for months 12/15 Evictions rise after moratorium ends 12/15 Phoenix: return of the 10min. eviction 12/15 Apple's new return to office date: TBD 12/15 Google: get vaccinated or face losing job 12/15 Nearly all students back in school full-time 12/15 Airlines suggest mask mandate not needed 12/15 Retail sales slow: inflation, shortages 12/15 California population loss accelerates 12/15 Los Angeles port record volume imports 12/15 Jobless millions can afford to ditch work? 12/15 Fed shifts to inflation fighting: less stimulus 12/15 Navy grapples w/jet fuel leak in Hawaii 12/15 LAPD tracked BLM, defund police online 12/15 US imposes sanctions Chinese drugmakers	12/15 DOH: 796,369 cases, 9635 deaths 12/15 More omicron cases: 'explosively fast' 12/15 Doctors worry: trio overwhelms hospitals 12/15 Outbreaks traced to wrestling tournaments 12/15 Tacoma universal basic income pilot 12/15 Gov. proposes \$800M for homelessness 12/15 Tukwila bridge closes indefinitely; damage 12/15 Fireworks NYE Space Needle but no crowds 12/15 Seattle clears Ballard homeless camp again 12/15 Judge: Navy jets impact Whidbey Island 12/15 Claim: ex-SPD chief favored for NYPD job
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	12/16 Australia, US sign Cloud Act deal 12/15 'DarkWatchman' new fileless malware 12/15 Emotet resumes Cobalt Strike installs 12/15 UK web app attacks surge 251% in 2yrs 12/15 Large phishing study delivers surprises 12/15 NCSC last minute seasonal scam warning	12/16 'Cyber most dangerous weapon in world' 12/15 Third flaw Log4j vulnerability emerges 12/15 China, Iran exploiting Log4j vulnerability 12/15 Original fix Log4j flaw fails to fully protect 12/15 Experts: breach victims freeze credit 12/15 Undetected credit card skimming attacks 12/15 AWS down again: impact to online services 12/15 FBI recovers stolen Oregon patient data 12/15 FBI accidentally reveals cybergang location	12/15 Social media threats to Seattle high schools
Terror Conditions Go to articles	12/15 Afghan women face old family pressures	12/15 Refugee crisis runs into housing crisis 12/15 Consortium combats soft target attacks 12/15 Months to book CIA prisoners into Gitmo 12/15 Foreign disinformation stokes terror fears	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles			12/15 Overnight fires Puget Sound region 12/15 Tukwila arson probe: 5 fires in 20min span 12/15 KCSO helicopters cause buzz over Seattle
Crime, Criminals Go to articles	12/15 US sanctions Brazil top drug gangs 12/15 German court: Russia 'state terrorism'	12/16 Baltimore officer ambushed on duty; shot 12/16 Report: 11 executions mark 3-decade low 12/15 Derek Chauvin guilty plea federal charges 12/15 Jan 6 probe: 80 charged have military ties 12/15 JFK assassination documents made public	12/15 Arrest: threat to harm school students 12/15 Pierce Co. teens: \$700,000 in damages 12/15 South King Co. cities face rising violence 12/15 Arrests: Queen Anne buildings set on fire 12/15 Seattle PD seized 650,000 fentanyl pills 2021

[DISCLAIMER and FAIR USE Notice](#)

Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Tacoma universal basic income pilot
----------	---

SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/tacoma/tacomas-universal-basic-income-pilot-program-starts-with-110-families/281-bfa9e22c-4d6c-41eb-8bc1-3242b2c4f03a
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — Researchers are hoping to have a better understanding of the impact of universal basic income by this time next year.</p> <p>Starting Wednesday, \$500 will be given to 110 families in Tacoma over the next 12 months.</p> <p>Dona Ponepinto, president and CEO of United Way of Pierce County, said researchers will be following the chosen families during that time to see how the money is being spent. The program will hopefully demonstrate how impactful guaranteed income can be for families who need extra help and provide lawmakers with more context to, Ponepinto said.</p> <p>“Our hope is that enough data is collected that’ll inform those policies at the state and federal level that also impact people that’re below the poverty line,” Ponepinto said.</p> <p>The program focuses on families who fit the ALICE standard, which are households that are technically above the poverty line, but still don’t make enough to support themselves.</p> <p>Abigail Lawson, who serves as the director for Tacoma’s Growing Resilience in Tacoma) GRIT program, said giving the money with no restrictions on how it’s spent is an important point because it would illustrate how effective guaranteed income can be in addressing people’s needs.</p> <p>“The reason that we’re doing this is to have a more well-rounded understanding of how guaranteed income is doing in our community, potentially highlighting the greatest need in our community, and just showcasing the agency they’ll have over there dollars that they’ll receive,” Lawson explained.</p> <p>So how much will this cost Tacoma?</p> <p>Mayor Victoria Woodards said \$100,000, which would cover administrative costs. The rest comes from Woodards’ connection to national organizations, along with fundraising from local businesses and community organizations.</p> <p>“This investment will really change the trajectory of people’s lives in our community and we are grateful for that,” Woodards said.</p> <p>Pierce County Councilmember Ryan Mello supports the program, hopes that community members see its value and that helping those who’re struggling right now benefits everyone in the long run.</p> <p>“It helps all of our economic security. Folks spend most of these dollars every month - they live month to month - that money gets recycled back into our local economy, those local small businesses and services,” Mello said. “It is so much cheaper and more humane to keep someone out of homelessness than it is to help someone come out of homelessness once they’ve fallen into it.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Judge: Navy jets impact Whidbey Island
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/federal-judges-says-navy-jets-impacting-whidbey-island
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — The Navy made several errors in its environmental impact statement for jet operations at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island.</p> <p>That's according to a report U.S. District Court Magistrate Judge Richard Creatura filed in a lawsuit over the growing fleet of aircraft, called Growlers.</p> <p>The federal lawsuit argues the Navy did not adequately review the potential environmental and public health impacts that increasing its Growler fleet from 82 to 118 jets would have on Whidbey Island and surrounding areas.</p>

	Those involved in the lawsuit have until Jan. 7 to file objections to Creatura's findings.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Doctors worry: trio overwhelms hospitals
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/doctors-worried-about-omicron-delta-and-flu-leading-to-over-capacity-at-hospitals
GIST	<p>In a time where hospitals are already stretched thin, doctors here in Western Washington worry about more problems ahead with the triple threat of omicron and delta variants along with the flu.</p> <p>“I worry that this could be another dark winter for our health care facilities,” said Dr. Seth Cohen, UW Medicine.</p> <p>On top of dealing with staffing shortages, at UW Medicine, doctors said they are still trying to catch up.</p> <p>“We are still way over capacity with other conditions and part of that is just the back up in care that COVID has caused,” Cohen said.</p> <p>They are doing what they can to make sure the situation doesn’t get worse.</p> <p>“We’re doing a lot to tighten up messaging, making sure people are wearing their mask correctly, making sure everyone is getting boosted who is eligible,” Cohen said. “We’re doing a lot to make sure everyone in the building absolutely need to be here.”</p> <p>At Virginia Mason, they are seeing high hospital and emergency department volume but there’s a plan in place to make sure patients get the treatment they need.</p> <p>“We do have the abilities to direct patients to other facilities that may not necessarily have the capacity restraints that it’s seeing, so if one region is getting hit with the flu, there are other parts of the system that can help, so we can direct patients around in a way that helps,” said Dr. Chris Baliga.</p> <p>Health experts are bracing for a tough road ahead and while this happening, some people have gotten their shot for both COVID-19 and the flu.</p> <p>“I think in the long run it’s going to help us out, because all this virus is going to do is just change,” Pati Mudd said.</p> <p>And with the news of the triple threat, others are anxious to get their booster.</p> <p>“If the doctors are saying it’s going to worse, I’m inclined to listen,” said Dalton Green.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/16 Sweden extends Covid restriction rules
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-extend-vaccine-pass-rules-nordic-travellers-2021-12-16/
GIST	<p>STOCKHOLM, Dec 16 (Reuters) - Sweden will require visitors from other Nordic nations to have a vaccine pass to cross the border as it gradually tightens restrictions in the face of rising number of COVID-19 infections and worries about the Omicron variant, the government said on Thursday.</p> <p>Sweden has seen new infections jump in recent days, if from levels below most European countries. It has reintroduced a limited number of measures and authorities said further steps would be needed if infections kept rising.</p>

"The new virus variant Omicron makes it hard to predict how things will develop," Health Minister Lena Hallengren told a news conference. "In Sweden, we are in a relatively better position, but even here infections and the burden on the health care system is increasing."

The extension of vaccine passrules to cover Nordic countries, hitherto the only nations not covered by the requirement, will come into force on Dec. 21.

Authorities also warned tighter restrictions may well be announced next week when the Public Health Agency publishes an update on how it sees the pandemic developing ahead.

"We need to prepare for a worsening situation," Karin Tegmark Wisell, the head of the Public Health Agency, said.

"We may communicate further measures next week to slow down the spread of infection."

The centre-left government has laid out a three-tier road map for its response to an increase in infections.

A number of measures have already been put into place and authorities are preparing for an extension of COVID pass demand to venues such as restaurants.

Earlier this week, Norway tightened COVID restrictions in a bid to limit the spread of the Omicron variant amid record levels of infections and hospitalizations.

Denmark has also reintroduced many restrictions, including closing primary schools in the lead-up to Christmas.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 South Africa record daily Covid cases
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-reports-record-daily-covid-19-infections-2021-12-15/
GIST	<p>JOHANNESBURG, Dec 15 (Reuters) - South Africa reported a record number of new daily COVID-19 infections on Wednesday in a fourth wave believed to be largely caused by the Omicron coronavirus variant.</p> <p>The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reported 26,976 new cases in the past 24 hours, surpassing a peak of 26,485 in early July during a third wave driven by the then-dominant Delta strain.</p> <p>The NICD also reported another 54 COVID-19 related deaths and an additional 620 hospital admissions.</p> <p>South Africa, the country worst affected by the pandemic on the African continent in terms of confirmed infections and deaths, alerted the world to Omicron in November, triggering alarm that it could cause a global surge in infections.</p> <p>Omicron has since been detected in more than 70 countries worldwide, with the World Health Organization labelling it "of concern".</p> <p>Scientists suspect that Omicron is more transmissible given its rapid spread though they caution it's too early to draw definitive conclusions about the severity of the disease that it causes.</p> <p>Some anecdotal accounts by doctors and researchers in South Africa suggest Omicron is mainly causing mild infections locally, but that could also be explained by high levels of previous COVID-19 infection and the fact that around 38% of the country's adult population are now fully vaccinated.</p> <p>A major real-world study released on Tuesday found Pfizer-BioNTech's (PFE.N), (22UAY.DE) COVID-19 vaccine had been less effective at keeping people infected with the virus out of hospital since Omicron emerged.</p>

HEADLINE	12/16 British surge seen as warning on omicron
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-lifestyle-health-travel-business-9eb16609e108037b165f71059aa2face
GIST	<p>LONDON (AP) — Spiraling infections in Britain driven in part by the new omicron variant of the coronavirus sent shockwaves Thursday into the rest of Europe, fueling a familiar dread that tighter restrictions will scuttle holiday plans again this year.</p> <p>Much remains unknown about omicron, but increasingly officials are warning that at the very least it appears more transmissible than the delta variant, which was already putting pressure on hospitals from the United States to the Netherlands. With so many questions outstanding, uncertainty reigned over how quickly and how severely to crack down on everything from travel to Christmas parties.</p> <p>After the U.K. recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections Wednesday since the pandemic began, France tightened entry rules for those coming from Britain.</p> <p>In England, the chief medical officer urged people to limit who they see in the festive period — though there has been much debate about how much should be canceled. In the U.S., meanwhile, the White House insisted there was no need for a lockdown, despite signs that omicron was gaining ground there.</p> <p>Globally, more than 75 countries have reported confirmed cases of the new variant. In Britain, where omicron cases are doubling every two to three days, the variant is expected to soon replace delta as the dominant strain in the country. Authorities in the 27-nation European Union expect omicron to be the dominant variant in the bloc by mid-January.</p> <p>In addition to hints that it's more contagious, early data suggest omicron may be milder but better at evading vaccines. Experts have urged caution in particular on drawing conclusions about how mild it is because hospitalizations lag behind infections and so many variables contribute to how sick people get.</p> <p>Also, even if omicron proves milder on the whole than delta, it may disarm some of the lifesaving tools available and put immune-compromised and elderly people at particular risk. And if it's more transmissible, more infections overall raise the risk of more serious ones.</p> <p>EU leaders gathering in Brussels for a summit Thursday sought to balance tackling the surge of infections across the continent while keeping borders open.</p> <p>But ahead of the meeting, European nations already were acting to rein in the spread of the virus.</p> <p>France said it will slap restrictions on travelers arriving from the U.K. — which is no longer part of the EU — putting limits on reasons for traveling and requiring 48-hour isolation upon arrival. The new measures will take effect first thing Saturday.</p> <p>French Prime Minister Jean Castex said the measures are being imposed “in the face of the extremely rapid spread of the omicron variant in the U.K.”</p> <p>The abrupt move comes after weeks of political tensions between France and Britain over fishing rights and how to deal with migration in dangerous small boats across the English Channel.</p> <p>It also comes as France's government is desperately trying to avoid a new lockdown or stricter measures that would hurt the economy and cloud President Emmanuel Macron's expected campaign for April presidential elections.</p> <p>Greece announced Wednesday that all travelers to the country will have to show a PCR test with a negative result starting Sunday whether they are vaccinated or not. Italy this week also required negative</p>

tests from vaccinated visitors, raising concerns that similar moves elsewhere will limit the ability of EU citizens to travel to see friends and relatives over the holidays.

Portugal's Prime Minister António Costa said he intends to keep tighter COVID-19 border controls in place beyond their planned end on Jan. 9 due to the threat from the highly infectious new omicron variant. In Greece,

England's chief medical officer warned the situation there is only likely to get worse during the holidays.

Professor Chris Whitty described the current situation as two epidemics in one — with omicron infections rising rapidly even as the country continues to grapple with the older delta variant, which is still causing a large number of infections.

Whitty advised people to limit their social contacts, putting a priority on those that are the most important.

Fearing a raft of canceled parties and a general drop in business at the height of the crucial and lucrative Christmas season, British restaurants and pubs demanded government help Thursday. They said concerns about the new variant have already wiped out 2 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) in sales over the last 10 days.

Jonathan Neame, chief executive of pub and brewery Shepherd Neame, said the grim warnings will plunge his business back to the start of the pandemic.

"We've seen a significant number of cancellations and that's accelerating every day, and will accelerate even further after the news last night, which seems to have thrown us back into that sort of zombie world of the first week of March, of the pandemic last year," he told Times Radio.

The Music Venue Trust said that a catastrophic drop in attendance and advance ticket sales have hit the industry since the government announced tougher restrictions last Wednesday, "placing the entire sector back on red alert for the risk of permanent closures."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 Double coronavirus surge; omicron spreads
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-lifestyle-health-business-383358fab484d2422aa4234c2221ba7
GIST	<p>The new omicron coronavirus mutant speeding around the world may bring another wave of chaos, threatening to further stretch hospital workers already struggling with a surge of delta cases and upend holiday plans for the second year in a row.</p> <p>The White House on Wednesday insisted there was no need for a lockdown because vaccines are widely available and appear to offer protection against the worst consequences of the virus. But even if omicron proves milder on the whole than delta, it may disarm some of the lifesaving tools available and put immune-compromised and elderly people at particular risk as it begins a rapid assault on the United States.</p> <p>"Our delta surge is ongoing and, in fact, accelerating. And on top of that, we're going to add an omicron surge," said Dr. Jacob Lemieux, who monitors variants for a research collaboration led by Harvard Medical School.</p> <p>"That's alarming, because our hospitals are already filling up. Staff are fatigued," leaving limited capacity for a potential crush of COVID-19 cases "from an omicron wave superimposed on a delta surge."</p> <p>Most likely, he and other experts said at a news briefing Tuesday, an omicron surge is already under way in the United States, with the latest mutant coronavirus outpacing the nation's ability to track it.</p>

Based on specimens collected last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said omicron accounted for about 3% of genetically-sequenced coronaviruses nationally. Percentages vary by region, with the highest — 13% — in the New York/New Jersey area.

But Harvard experts said these are likely underestimates because omicron is moving so fast that surveillance attempts can't keep up.

Globally, more than 75 countries have reported confirmed cases of omicron. In the United States, 36 states have detected the variant. Meanwhile, delta is surging in many places, with hot spots in New England and the upper Midwest. The five states with the highest two-week rolling average of cases per 100,000 people are New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Michigan, Minnesota and Vermont.

[Universities are abruptly closing classrooms](#) during finals week with infections multiplying at a fast rate. Both [the NBA and NHL have had to postpone games, and the NFL had its worst two-day outbreak](#) since the start of the pandemic, with dozens of players infected.

Outside the U.S., [the president of the European Union said omicron will become the dominant variant in a month](#) and declared that “once again, this Christmas will be overshadowed by the pandemic.”

Scientists around the world are racing to understand omicron, which has a large number of worrisome mutations in important regions of its genetic structure that could affect how it spreads from person to person. How quickly the number of cases doubles, known as “doubling time,” can give a preview of what the disease burden could be in a few weeks.

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said Wednesday that early data suggests omicron is more transmissible than delta, with a doubling time of about two days.

[In Britain, where omicron cases are doubling every two to three days,](#) the variant is expected to [soon replace delta as the dominant strain in the country.](#)

The U.K. on Wednesday recorded the highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, and England's chief medical officer warned that the situation is likely to get worse as omicron drives a new wave of illness during the holidays.

“The data out of the UK are quite alarming at this point,” and foreshadow what's to come in the United States, said Bronwyn MacInnis, director of pathogen genomic surveillance at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. For example, she said, by Tuesday afternoon, omicron was already the most common variant in London.

In many ways, omicron remains a mystery. Hints are emerging from South Africa, where it was first reported, indicating it may cause less severe disease than delta but be better at evading vaccines.

But, MacInnis warned: “There's much more that we don't know about this variant than we do, including the severity.”

At the same time, Lemieux said, there seem to be fewer tools to fight it. Some monoclonal antibody treatments don't work as well against omicron in lab tests, Lemieux said. Vaccines appear to offer less protection, although CDC officials said booster shots strengthen that protection.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said Wednesday there is no need, for now, for an omicron-specific booster shot. The two-dose mRNA vaccines, the Pfizer and Moderna shots, still appear to offer considerable protection against hospitalization from omicron, Fauci said.

“If we didn't have these tools, I would be telling you to really, really be worried,” Fauci said.

Jeff Zients, the White House coronavirus response coordinator, said the U.S. has the tools to fight the virus, including omicron, and “there is no need to lock down.” With vaccines available now for 95% of Americans, “we know how to keep our kids in schools and our businesses open. And we’re not going to shut down.”

Health officials called on Americans to get vaccinated, get their booster shots, wear masks indoors and get tested before traveling and before holiday gatherings.

“Hospital capacity is already at a breaking point in many states because of severe cases of COVID-19,” Michael Fraser, CEO of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, said in a statement.

Given the high level of transmission, MacInnis said there will undoubtedly be severe cases.

“No matter how severely it affects healthy, fully vaccinated and boosted populations, it will hit the most vulnerable among us the hardest still,” she said. “So the elderly, the immunocompromised, other vulnerable populations will still be at greatest risk and still bear the brunt of this.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 California population loss accelerates
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/california-population-loss-accelerated-during-pandemic-11639564203
GIST	<p>California is losing more than twice as many people to domestic migration as it was before the pandemic, a new report from University of California researchers shows.</p> <p>The research released Wednesday shows the change is largely being driven by a drop in the number of people moving to California from other parts of the U.S. and is most acute in the high-cost San Francisco Bay Area.</p> <p>The researchers examined anonymized credit bureau data and found that the downward trend in net domestic migration has been accelerated by a 38% decrease in the number of new arrivals between March 2020 and September of this year. The number of new arrivals declined in all of the state’s 58 counties.</p> <p>“Entrances have been really stable over time, but they did dip pretty substantially since the pandemic,” said Natalie Holmes, a UC Berkeley doctoral student and one of the authors of the report from the nonpartisan California Policy Lab.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the number of Californians leaving has increased by 12%, a return to pre-pandemic trends. In total, 150,000 more people on average left California than entered in the third quarter of 2021, compared with 60,000 net exits in the first three months of 2020. The actual volume of the flows is likely even bigger, Ms. Holmes said, since the analysis relies on credit data and is less representative of younger and lower-income residents.</p> <p>The report didn’t explore why fewer people are coming to the state than before. Previous research has suggested housing costs and affordability are key factors. Many Americans re-evaluated where to live during the pandemic as businesses closed and larger numbers of people were able to work remotely.</p> <p>An analysis published in May by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California showed that people who move to California tend to have higher incomes and higher education levels than those who move out.</p> <p>California has been losing more people to other states than it gains for years, census data and state estimates show. Last year, its population decreased for the first time in recorded history. In another first, California will lose a congressional seat in the once-a-decade redistricting process now under way.</p> <p>The shift is especially large in and around San Francisco. The number of new arrivals to the Bay Area plummeted 45% between March 2020 and September 2021, while exits increased by 21%.</p>

	<p>Between 2016 and the first quarter of 2020, the three Bay Area counties of San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara were the only ones statewide to see more people move in from other states than leave. But that trend reversed during the pandemic, with all three losing population through domestic migration.</p> <p>The median sale price for existing single-family homes in the Bay Area was \$1,275,000 in October according to data from the California Association of Realtors, one of the highest in the nation.</p> <p>Most Californians who move in any given year remain in-state, data show. A previous Wall Street Journal analysis of postal service change-of-address data found that the pandemic increased the flow of residents from the state's coastal counties to cheaper inland areas by nearly 50%.</p> <p>The Policy Lab report found an increasing share of Californians who move are choosing to go out of state. More than one in five California movers left the state entirely in the third quarter of 2021, up from 16.3% in 2016.</p> <p>The new report doesn't take into account international immigration, which has historically helped stem the state's population losses from migration. However, estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau suggest those numbers are also on a downward trend.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Jobless millions can afford to ditch work?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/15/economy/labor-force-retirement-great-resignation/index.html
GIST	<p>New York (CNN Business)One of the more insidious myths this year was that young people didn't want to work because they were getting by just fine on government aid. People had too much money, went the narrative.</p> <p>Only trouble is, the numbers don't back it up.</p> <p>Instead, early retirement — whether forced by the pandemic or made possible otherwise — is playing a big role in America's evolving labor market.</p> <p>People have left the workforce for myriad reasons in the past two years — layoffs, health insecurity, child care needs, and any number of personal issues that arose from the disruption caused by the pandemic. But among those who have left and are not able to — or don't want to — return, the vast majority are older Americans who accelerated their retirement.</p> <p>Earlier this month, ADP Chief Economist Nela Richardson said the strong stock market along with soaring home prices "has given some higher income people options. We already saw a large portion of the Boomer workforce retiring. And they're in a better position now."</p> <p>In assessing the jobs recovery, economists have pointed out that while the unemployment rate has come down, the labor force participation rate hasn't improved at the same pace. But Jared Bernstein, a member of President Joe Biden's Council of Economic Advisers, said that once "non-prime age" workers — those over 55 — are excluded from the metrics a much clearer picture of how the labor recovery is doing emerges because it strips out the retirement narrative.</p> <p>Last month, there were 3.6 million more Americans who had left the labor force and said they didn't want a job compared with November 2019, says Aaron Sojourner, a labor economist and professor at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.</p> <p>Older Americans, age 55 and up, accounted for whopping 90% of that increase.</p> <p>"I think a lot of the narratives imagine prime-age workers as being missing, but it actually skews much older," Sojourner told CNN Business.</p>

The labor shortage and retirement

The oft-lamented labor shortage has become a shorthand for the complicated reality of the pandemic-era labor force.

Americans are quitting their jobs in record numbers — more than 4 million each month since July — but much of that quitting is happening among young people who are leaving for other jobs or better pay.

They're not leaving the workforce entirely.

"Part of it is a job quality shortage," says Sojourner. "It's a bit of a puzzle why employers aren't raising wages and improving working conditions fast enough to draw people back in. They say they want to hire people — there are 11 million job openings — but they're not creating job openings that people want."

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell underscored that issue during a news conference on Wednesday.

"There's a demographic trend underlying all of this... The question of how much we can get back is a good one, and what we can do is try to create the conditions," that allow people to come back, he said.

To be sure, some companies have been raising wages to attract and retain staff. Some businesses also offer signing bonuses to get workers in the door. But economists aren't sure whether these incentives are here to stay and will improve conditions for workers in the long term.

"I can want a 65-inch TV for \$50, but it doesn't mean there's a TV shortage, it means I'm not willing to pay enough to get somebody to sell me a TV," said Sojourner.

Nearly 70% of the 5 million people who left the labor force during the pandemic are older than 55, according to researchers from Goldman Sachs, and many of them aren't looking to return.

Retirements tend to be "stickier" than other labor force exits, the researchers wrote. Even so, they expect that an improving virus situation and increased vaccination will allow older workers to return to the labor force.

In normal times, retired people are often drawn back into the workforce. But the "unretirement" rate fell significantly during the pandemic, exacerbating the shortage of workers, according to research from the Kansas City Fed.

There are some early signs that seniors are coming back to the workforce as vaccination rates increase and employers offer higher wages. The unretirement rate fell to just over 2% early in the pandemic, but in recent months has ticked up to around 2.6%, according to Nick Bunker, an economist at Indeed. That's still off from the pre-pandemic rate of around 3%.

Then again, older workers are potentially competing with younger, more qualified applicants for jobs, which could make their return more challenging.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 Omicron upends pandemic rules
SOURCE	https://www.greenwichtime.com/news/article/How-omicron-is-changing-the-rules-of-the-covid-19-16706358.php
GIST	The pandemic playbook is, once again, being torn up. In the course of just a few weeks, the omicron variant has upended recent calculations made about covid-19, prompting a return to travel restrictions and calls to stay home, as well as a new push for booster shots and a reevaluation of tactics such as vaccine passports.

The change is most acute now in Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson's plans for a normal Christmas have been upended, once again, by a fast-moving variant. On Wednesday, a top U.K. health official told parliament that omicron was "probably the most significant threat we've had since the start of the pandemic." Similar scenarios could soon be playing out across the world.

Rich, vaccine-abundant nations that had once hoped the pandemic was over are now recalculating. Some worry they are overreacting. Speaking to Britain's Sky News this week, the head of South Africa's Medical Association warned that Britain created "hysteria" by overreacting to the threat of the variant.

"You need to take precautionary measures, you have to be prepared but don't hype it up," Angelique Coetzee said on Tuesday.

Others have even argued that the spread of omicron could signal the final days of the coronavirus outbreak, pointing to some signs that the variant may produce less serious illness than the current globally dominant variant, delta. Some even see hope in the sharp rise of cases: Conservative outlets like the National Review are wondering if omicron is "not that scary after all" while Wall Street analysts have said it "could accelerate the end of the pandemic."

The argument rests on the theory that the coronavirus would become more transmissible and less deadly as it evolves, as was the case with the influenza virus that caused the 1918 flu pandemic. Are these positions fair? Are countries overreacting to omicron? It is still too early to say for sure, but consider these three points.

First, cases seem to be spreading fast. On Wednesday, Britain announced that it had recorded 78,610 new cases - a daily increase not seen at any point during the pandemic, even during the initial wave of delta. Hospitalizations have increased, too, though at a slower rate, while deaths are at worst flat. The number of confirmed omicron cases in Britain has increased to 10,017, though there are likely many more - Health Secretary Sajid Javid estimated on Monday that 200,000 may contract omicron cases that day.

Some experts have predicted that Britain could see as many as a million covid-19 cases a day by the end of December, potentially beyond the limits of its testing capability. "I'm sure for example the numbers that we see on data over the next few days will be quite staggering compared to the rate of growth that we've seen in cases for previous variants," Jenny Harries, head of Britain's Health Security Agency, told Parliament on Wednesday.

Another major study released from South Africa, where the variant was first recorded to be spreading widely, suggests a similarly rapid spread.

"The omicron-driven fourth wave has a significantly steeper trajectory of new infections relative to prior waves," Ryan Noach, the head of Discovery Health, South Africa's largest health insurer, said in a statement Tuesday. "National data show an exponential increase in both new infections and test positivity rates during the first three weeks of this wave, indicating a highly transmissible variant with rapid community spread of infection."

Secondly, our current vaccination regimens may be less effective against omicron. In South Africa, Discovery Health found that the vaccine from U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and German partner BioNTech provided just 33% protection against infection from the omicron variant, though it still offered 70% protection against hospitalization.

Similar data came last week from the U.K. Health Security Agency, which reported that the standard two-dose regimen of either the AstraZeneca or Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine offered poor protection against symptomatic infection by omicron, with Pfizer's protection falling to between 30% and 40% at 15 weeks after the second dose and AstraZeneca's to zero.

Omicron has a wide variety of mutations that make it different from the original strain of the coronavirus. Some of these mutations appear to help it evade the disease-fighting antibodies that are created by

vaccination or prior infection, hence why there seems to be a higher risk of re-infection with omicron for those who have recovered from the virus.

The good news is that vaccines do still have some potency against omicron, especially when used as extra "booster" shots for those already considered fully immunized. On Wednesday, Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said that after reviewing data, the U.S. government did not feel that a new omicron-specific vaccine needed to be developed.

"Our booster vaccine regimens work against omicron. At this point, there is no need for a variant-specific booster," Fauci said at a White House coronavirus briefing. "If you are unvaccinated, you are very vulnerable - not only to the existing delta surge we are experiencing but also to omicron."

Finally, even if omicron proves milder than other variants, it could still upend current covid-19 strategies. Early data from South Africa suggests that omicron may cause less severe infection, especially compared with the devastating delta. But it is not clear to what extent this finding is related to high rates of immunity from vaccination and infection in South Africa or to the country's relatively young population. It remains to be seen whether it will hold true in other nations with different demographic profiles.

If omicron does cause milder illness, its ability to spread fast and to defeat some of the protection provided by vaccines still worries doctors and public health experts. In an article in Time on Wednesday, Gavin Yamey, William Hanage and Tom Moultrie asked readers to imagine that the entire world caught the common cold, itself a less virulent coronavirus, at the same time.

"There would be a rise in deaths among older, vulnerable people - such as those in nursing homes - and the mass absences from work would have major societal consequences. Even if only a small percentage of people get ill or die, a small percentage of a very large number would still be a large number," the three global health experts write.

The need for boosters is also likely to further dash hopes for speeding up global vaccination. Covax, the only real effort to get vaccinations out around the world, struggled to get doses throughout 2021. The need for booster shots in wealthy nations could disrupt that further: The World Health Organization is already expecting a shortfall of 3 billion doses next year, partly because of that. And even if omicron does cause less serious disease, delta may still be raging in many countries for some time.

Omicron may have changed the rule book of the pandemic, but the game goes on. It's far from certain that the coronavirus will become less deadly as it evolves and with much of the world still unvaccinated - leaving room for new variants to emerge - the alternative possibility is out there. Covid-19's final days could still be a long, and painful, way off.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 Super typhoon slams into Philippines
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/16/asia/super-typhoon-rai-philippines-intl-hnk/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Super Typhoon Rai, known locally as Odette, slammed into the eastern coast of the Philippines on Thursday afternoon, bringing torrential rain and the threat of widespread flooding across the archipelago.</p> <p>The storm intensified rapidly as it approached the coast, strengthening from a Category 1 to a Category 5 storm in just 24 hours.</p> <p>By the time it made landfall on Siargao Island, a popular tourist and surfing destination on the central east coast, the storm had reached sustained winds of 260 kilometers per hour (160 miles per hour) with gusts over 300 kilometers per hour (185 miles per hour).</p> <p>Around 198,000 people have already evacuated from their homes to government shelters, the country's National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) said on Thursday.</p>

Many preemptive evacuations and storm preparations began earlier in the week as the country began seeing heavy rain. In central Misamis Oriental province, the Agay-ayan River overflowed on Tuesday, flooding streets and homes with muddy brown water.

The human-induced climate crisis is making typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones more intense and destructive, and the Philippines is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations.

The super typhoon is expected to travel through the country's central and southern regions. Some of the worst conditions are expected in Surigao Province, which lies on the northern tip of Mindanao, one of the country's major islands.

The storm is also expected to hit a number of provinces in the country's Visayas region, a central group of islands. More than 20 million people live in the Visayas, according to 2020 official figures.

In Surigao Province, more than 2,600 people have been evacuated as of Wednesday evening, according to the state-owned Philippine News Agency.

Photos from Surigao show one sports complex turned into an evacuation center, with plastic tents set up in a large hall and families asleep on rugs and tarps on the floor.

Meanwhile in Eastern Visayas, more than 45,000 people have evacuated to government shelters in the Eastern Visayas region, according to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council on Thursday.

"We are getting pounded already by strong wind and rain," said Governor Ben Evardone of Samar Province, located in Eastern Visayas.

Risks of floods and landslides

In Tacloban City, just outside Samar, hundreds of residents have also taken shelter in evacuation sites. Many lived through Super Typhoon Yolanda, which killed more than 6,000 Filipinos in 2013 -- and they're not taking any chances now.

"We are concerned that this storm is taking the same path as the typhoon in 2011, and the other in 2013," said Karen Janes Ungar, the country representative for the humanitarian organization Catholic Relief Services Philippines.

"However, we have learned a lot from both of those previous disasters, and in a lot of disaster preparedness ... for this emergency."

The biggest concern, she added, are smaller towns on the coast, home to fishermen and poorer populations that might not have access to government announcements or are unable to evacuate.

Thousands of villages in the storm's projected path are at high risk of flooding and landslide, with the region's soil already saturated and unsteady from the week's heavy rain, according to the country's Mines and Geosciences Bureau, which urged local authorities to prepare evacuation plans.

Airlines have canceled dozens of flights, while transport authorities banned sea and land travel in the central and southern Philippines, leaving thousands stranded at ports.

Humanitarian organizations and aid agencies are also on the ground, working with local authorities to prepare for the storm and assist in evacuations. Teams from the Philippine Red Cross are spread out across the east coast, helping organize first aid teams, food and water, and supplies such as blankets and safety equipment.

	<p>"Filipinos are tough but this Super Typhoon is a bitter blow for millions of people who are still recovering from devastating storms, floods and Covid-19 in the past year," said Philippine Red Cross Chairman Richard Gordon in a news release on Thursday.</p> <p>Super Typhoon Rai is the 15th storm to hit the country this year -- compounding the struggles of people still recovering. Millions are still rebuilding their homes and livelihoods, especially after several devastating storms late last year, according to the Red Cross.</p> <p>Typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones -- which are essentially the same weather event but in different parts of the world -- are producing more rainfall, moving more slowly once they make landfall and generating larger storm surges because of climate change.</p> <p>A recent study by researchers at the Shenzhen Institute of Meteorological Innovation and the Chinese University of Hong Kong said that typhoons in Asia could have double their destructive power by the end of the century. They already last between two and nine hours longer and travel an average of 100 km (62 miles) further inland than they did four decades ago.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Flu 'steady' comeback amid rise in Covid
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/15/health/flu-covid-increase-cdc/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)US health officials are bracing for a trio of public health concerns this winter: more infections from the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, surging infections with the Delta variant, and a "slow but steady" comeback of the flu.</p> <p>There is growing concern that a rise in Omicron cases, paired with climbing Delta cases and an increase in flu cases, could overwhelm health systems this winter, as well as possibly leading to a need to ramp up Covid-19 testing capacities, Lori Tremmel Freeman, chief executive officer of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), told CNN on Wednesday.</p> <p>"It's the combination. It's kind of the perfect storm of public health impacts here with Delta already impacting many areas of the country and jurisdictions," Freeman said. "We don't want to overwhelm systems more."</p> <p>After circulating at nearly nonexistent levels last year, the flu is reappearing in certain areas across the United States, Dr. Manish Patel, team lead for the influenza prevention and control team at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said during a call hosted by the CDC's Clinician Outreach and Communication Activity (COCA) group last week.</p> <p>"We do know influenza is going to come back and already has started to reappear in many places in the United States," Patel said.</p> <p>Now, health officials and doctors are preparing for more illness this winter.</p> <p>'It makes sense for us to be prepared'</p> <p>The nation continues to grapple with the coronavirus pandemic, and health officials worry about adding flu patients to this burden.</p> <p>"It makes sense for us to be prepared and maintain vigilance for influenza," Patel said.</p> <p>He added that flu activity is unpredictable.</p> <p>"Last year or last season -- really, in the past 18 months -- we have had no influenza activity in the United States and minimal activity globally in the Southern Hemisphere or the Northern Hemisphere. And this really has not happened before since we've had surveillance for influenza," Patel said. "The jury is still out on reasons why that hasn't happened."</p>

In the first week of December, 841 people were admitted to US hospitals with influenza, according to the CDC. That's up from the prior week, when there were 496 new flu admissions.

"Overall, influenza activity is still low; however, an increasing number of influenza positive tests have been reported by clinical and public health laboratories during recent weeks," the CDC said in its weekly flu report. The majority of flu viruses were detected in young people, ages 5 to 24, but the proportion of flu virus detections among adults 25 and older has increased in recent weeks.

In late November, the CDC said increased flu activity has been detected among young adults and college students, which could mean the start of a new flu season. The agency also noted that as the flu and the virus that causes Covid-19 both circulate, the combination could stress health care systems throughout the United States.

Worry about a winter wave

"We are already in a Delta surge," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told CNN's Wolf Blitzer on Wednesday night.

"The cases are going up. We have an average of about 117,000 cases. We have an increase in the percentage of hospitalizations. Deaths are still over a thousand," Fauci said. "Then you have, looking over your shoulder, the Omicron variant, which we know, from what's going on in South Africa and in the UK, is a highly transmissible virus.

"That's the reason why we are encouraging people, if they haven't been vaccinated, to get vaccinated but, as importantly, for those who've been fully vaccinated to get a booster."

The United States is averaging 119,888 new Covid-19 cases each day, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, as of Wednesday. This is about 50% higher than a month ago.

The United States is now also averaging 1,261 deaths each day, according to JHU. This is 5% higher than a month ago.

There are 67,306 people now hospitalized with Covid-19, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services. Hospitalizations have been trending up for more than two months, and this is 43% higher than a month ago.

This January, the United States could face a surge of Covid-19 cases, with the Omicron variant possibly contributing to the winter wave, according to modeling data that was presented to state and local health officials during a call with the CDC on Tuesday.

But that's just one possible scenario.

The CDC told CNN in a written statement Tuesday that the agency "regularly discusses planning scenarios with public health officials around the country," and Tuesday's discussion "was part of a regularly scheduled meeting hosted by the CDC COVID-19 Response with the leaders of four public health organizations."

The statement noted that the CDC is "preparing for a range of scenarios" involving the Omicron variant, and a portion of Tuesday's meeting was dedicated to "discussion around results from various modeling groups related to Omicron" -- but no CDC, US Department of Health and Human Services or US government models were presented.

The modeling information, along with data from Europe, indicates that the number of Covid-19 cases caused by the Omicron variant has the potential to double every two days, NACCHO's Freeman told CNN.

"When you think about how this virus has the potential to double every two days, then in a couple of weeks, we're going to be facing a lot of cases of Omicron," said Freeman, who was on part of Tuesday's call.

"That modeling implies that sometime in January, we will be at a different stage of recognizing Omicron, maybe as even a predominant virus. However, we still are learning about the severity, transmissibility," Freeman said. "The data is emerging from around the world."

The proportion of Omicron cases in the United States is expected to "continue to grow in the coming weeks," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said during a virtual White House briefing Wednesday. She added that early data suggests Omicron is more transmissible than Delta, with a doubling time of about two days.

While the Delta variant continues to cause the most Covid-19 cases in the United States, Omicron has gone from causing 0.4% of cases in the week ending December 4 to 2.9% of cases in the week ending December 11, according to CDC data.

Currently, CDC data indicates that Delta causes 96.8% of cases.

'We are definitely seeing an uptick in both infections'

Dr. Christina Johns, a pediatrician in Annapolis, Maryland, told CNN last week that there has been a "slow but steady" increase in patients testing positive for flu and Covid-19 in her pediatric network in recent weeks.

"We are definitely seeing an uptick in both infections over the last week," said Johns, emergency medicine physician and senior medical adviser for PM Pediatrics, which has more than 70 pediatric office locations across the United States.

"We are starting to see a slow and steady trickle of an increase of cases. And why is that? Well, because this is the time of year when we typically start to see influenza begin to circulate," she said. "But why aren't we seeing the explosive uptick? One reason is that school-aged children are still largely masked in many school districts, and so I think that that helps to keep numbers down. The overall layered protective measures that are still in place in many areas are effective for both Covid as well as influenza."

This winter, Johns said, there is the concern of a potential "twindemic" of Covid-19 and flu, and it's important for people with any respiratory symptoms this season to see their doctor immediately for testing.

She said when young people -- up to age 26 -- come into her office with symptoms, such as a cough, fever or runny nose, the only way to determine whether they have the flu, Covid-19 or a common cold is through testing.

"I think that that's an important point that needs to be made, especially right now while we are still in the midst of this pandemic," Johns said.

"It is difficult to tell the difference without a test. There are some trends. Typically for influenza, the clinical hallmark is high fever, and that occurs less so in the common cold and is not always a feature of Covid-19 infection," Johns said. "But none of that is 100%, and there's enough overlap in all three of these that, really, the only way to know the difference is through testing."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Pandemic traumatized health care workers
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/15/health/covid-traumatized-health-professionals/index.html
GIST	(CNN)Hospitals are struggling to hold on to nurses and other professionals, staff are traumatized and the influx of patients feels like it's coming out of a fire hose, doctors say.

The Covid-19 pandemic, entering its third year with 800,000 people dead in the US alone, could damage the health industry for years to come, they predict.

"It feels like you are drinking from a fire hose with no way to control that flow," Dr. John Hick, an emergency physician at Hennepin Healthcare in Minnesota, told reporters Tuesday.

"I have been practicing for 25 years in the emergency department and every shift I am working these days is like the worst shift in my career."

And many patients are hostile, making matters worse, said Dr. Jessi Gold, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Washington University in St. Louis. "Now people are yelling at you and telling you that you don't know anything," she said. "So it's like a fire hose in a setting that hates you."

It got so bad that hospital leaders in Minnesota took out a full-page newspaper ad this week. "We're heartbroken. We're overwhelmed," it read. "Our emergency departments are overfilled, and we have patients in every bed in our hospitals."

Dr. Rahul Koranne, president and chief executive officer of the Minnesota Hospital Association, said the pandemic hit when hospitals and public health departments were already thin.

"We were already short thousands of workers before the first Covid case showed up, and now the health care workers are exhausted. They are retiring. They are resigning," Koranne told CNN.

"They are going to other industries. That is limiting our care capacity, and so we're telling our community that at this point if you had a motor vehicle accident or had a heart attack our care capacity is limited. It's really a crisis."

A crisis in care

A CNN analysis of Johns Hopkins University data shows about one in five patients in intensive care units around the country are being treated for Covid-19. Close to 67,000 people are in the hospital with Covid-19 and US Health and Human Services Department data shows a 42% increase in hospitalizations over the past month.

"Our beds are full. Our emergency departments are full. Our hallways have patients in them, some on breathing machines, and at this point our care capacity is stretched to the very limits, so we're invoking our hearts. We want our communities to know the dire situation that we're in right now," Koranne said.

Staff have been leaving, said Hick.

"We can't get any help. And that's honestly the bottom line of the biggest problems here is that we just don't have the staffing, and the personnel resources in particular," Hick told a briefing organized by SciLine, a science journalism service sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"And that's really led to an awful lot of burnout ... but just the continuing emotional grind, in addition to the physical fatigue of caring for these patients and adapting to the challenges of working in PPE, and being the only connection sometimes between patient and family, has been terribly difficult," Hick added.

Hostility and disbelief

Patients and their families are often not grateful and sometimes outright hostile.

"Our workforce shortages are extreme, and I think it's been extraordinarily hard on the workforce to go from being heroes to being questioned to being distrusted, you know, to really feeling like they're not only under the gun but also sometimes being assaulted by patients," Hick said.

It's affecting patients, too, Hick said.

"This morning's number we had over 246 patients waiting more than four hours in emergency departments across the state of Minnesota for inpatient beds that are simply not available," he said.

Hospitals, doctors, nurses and other health care workers are now watching to see what the Omicron variant does.

Studies from South Africa indicate the new variant significantly evades the protection offered by vaccines -- not completely -- and fewer people are ending up in hospitals there. But it's also apparently far more transmissible than the Delta variant, already accounting for 3% of cases in the US.

That could mean more people in hospitals just because of the sheer numbers of new infections.

Thanksgiving holiday travel led to one uptick in cases and the many holidays between now and the end of the year could mean more mixing, mingling, travel -- and infections.

"So expect the hospitals to continue to be very overloaded throughout the first quarter of next year," Hick said.

A profession struggling with trauma

Health care workers already often have poorer mental health than the US public in general, said Gold, who specializes in treating health care professionals.

"Health care workers are not people who had good mental health before Covid," she said.

"It's not like Covid came and all of a sudden we're having problems. We had longstanding problems."

Medical school students have high rates of depression, she said. "When we mean burnout, it's workplace-associated and it has to do with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, which in health care workers looks like a lack of empathy or sort of like treating patients like objects, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment," Gold said. "In physicians, it's about 50% when you look at burnout, and that's before Covid."

Doctors, nurses and other health professionals feel like the pandemic has sent things spinning out of control, Hick said.

"I think one of the biggest contributors to burnout and PTSD symptoms is powerlessness. And I think that's what an awful lot of our providers are experiencing right now. And, as Jessi mentioned, there's no way to fix that right now. I mean, we've got to have all hands on deck."

Gold doesn't see the problems ending any time soon.

"It's not like Covid's going to stop and all of a sudden, we're magically better," she said.

"I think we'll see a higher increase in mental health outcomes for the whole population but particularly in healthcare workers, and the studies we have with comparisons from other pandemics would suggest at least two years out we will be seeing this."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 Sports leagues face rapidly rising outbreaks
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/sports/us-sports-leagues-cope-with-covid-19-outbreaks-amid-variants/
GIST	DENVER (AP) — U.S. sports leagues are seeing rapidly increasing COVID-19 outbreaks with dozens of players in health and safety protocols, amid an ongoing surge by the delta variant of the coronavirus and rising cases of the highly transmissible omicron mutation.

Both the NBA and NHL have had to postpone games over the last month with so many players sidelined, and the men's basketball teams at Tulane and the University of Washington have seen cancellations due to outbreaks in their programs. The NFL won't postpone games, saying forfeits could be in play instead.

The difficulties for U.S. sports come on the heels of soaring infections in Europe, where English Premier League officials called off three soccer matches in four days due to the virus and the German government temporarily restricted Bundesliga arenas to 50% attendance or 15,000 fans.

But don't expect the U.S. leagues to return to "bubble" play or shut down for a couple of weeks to let things subside.

"The way our system is set up now, an infection triggers a chain of events and that leads to confusion, disruption, mayhem. But from a medical respect, these people are mainly vaccinated and not going to go to the hospital," said Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious disease specialist at the University of California, San Francisco.

"We're in a very different world from a year ago. ... It's not too bad for young, healthy athletes," Chin-Hong added.

And there's too much financially at stake for leagues to consider shutdowns, given the millions upon millions of dollars lost when sports took a hiatus last year. There's also fan pressure to take into account.

"The short answer is money. It's what's driving (the leagues') decisions to continue to play, even in the face of these outbreaks," said Nola Agha, a professor of sports management at the University of San Francisco.

"I don't think they will reduce the number of fans or shut down the entire season," she continued. "I think they will continue to do the best they can within local health department guidelines, which might reduce the number of fans."

In Canada on Wednesday, the country's largest province, Ontario — home to the NBA's Toronto Raptors and the NHL's Toronto Maple Leafs and Ottawa Senators — set a cap of 50% of capacity for large gatherings such as professional sports events.

So far the NHL has had the most postponed games for a league in North America this season, with 10. The Senators were first in mid-November, followed by the Calgary Flames and the Carolina Hurricanes this week. On Wednesday alone, the Nashville Predators added six players and six staff members to the health and safety protocols, and Boston Bruins captain Patrice Bergeron went in as well.

The omicron variant is mostly responsible for the uptick in NHL cases, according to a person with direct knowledge of discussions between the league and the NHL Players' Association, but it does not account for all positive tests. The person spoke on the condition of anonymity because the talks were private.

The person also said the NHL is reintroducing enhanced COVID-19 protocols including restricting players to their hotels while on the road and bringing back daily testing through at least Jan. 7.

Interim coach Derek King of the Chicago Blackhawks, who were supposed to play the Flames this week, said the team has been reinforcing with players the importance of social distancing, hygiene and avoiding crowds.

"Just really knuckle down, because we don't want to be one of those teams that's got to rearrange their schedule because we have COVID," King said.

The NBA also has several stars in COVID-19 protocols right now, including the Milwaukee Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo and the Brooklyn Nets' James Harden. As of Wednesday afternoon, 33 players

— about 6.5% of the league — were in the protocols, with 17 of those playing for either Chicago or Brooklyn.

The Bulls had games postponed Tuesday and Thursday because they didn't have enough players available, while Brooklyn played with an NBA-minimum roster of eight on Tuesday.

That same night, when Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry set a record for career three-pointers at New York's Madison Square Garden, NBA commissioner Adam Silver wasn't in the audience — both he and deputy commissioner Mark Tatum have been undergoing daily testing after attending an event hosted by Toronto president Masai Ujiri, who tested positive soon after.

"Like the rest of the country, and as was predicted by our infectious disease specialists, we have seen an increase of cases around the league," NBA spokesman Mike Bass said Wednesday, adding that the league will continue to be guided by science and data and cooperate with the Players Association.

The NBA says 97% of players are vaccinated and just over 60% have received booster shots.

Preeti Malani, the University of Michigan's chief health officer, an infectious disease expert and a member of two Big Ten COVID-19 advisory committees, said boosters will be "essential" to avoiding schedule disruptions.

"The biggest thing we can do, whether it's sports or school or workplace, is to be highly vaccinated. ... That means being boosted in addition to the primary series," Malani said.

The NFL is perhaps fortunate in that most of its games are played outdoors, so there's less risk for fans.

But the league is having its worst outbreak in terms of players on the reserve/COVID list: Eighty-eight tested positive Monday and Tuesday, and several more were added Wednesday including eight on the Washington Football Team. The L.A. Rams have 16 on the list.

It's a small percentage for a league with about 2,200 players between active rosters, injured reserves and practice squads. But omicron could cause that to rise quickly.

New York Giants coach Joe Judge said his players are now wearing masks indoors and are spaced out more in meetings.

"Anyone who's been involved in any kind of a close contact or test at this point has either been removed or separated from the team, and they're in virtual meetings," Judge said.

The NFL Players Association has raised alarms for months about the league moving from daily to weekly testing, which hampers detection of outbreaks.

Chin-Hong of UCSF said they're right to be concerned and the NFL should rethink the policy.

"(Testing) once a week is so 2020," he said. "We have the technology to do it several times a day."

On the college level, there have been some other cancellations besides the ones involving Tulane and Washington: Cleveland State men's basketball; Iowa women's basketball; and a postponed Cal Bears football game.

The American Athletic Conference, Pac-12, Southeastern Conference and Big East all told AP that their policies haven't changed since the beginning of the school year: Teams unable to play conference games will forfeit.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/health-worker-vaccine-mandate-blocked-in-half-the-states/
GIST	<p>NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A federal appeals court panel on Wednesday lifted a nationwide ban against President Joe Biden’s vaccine mandate for health care workers, instead blocking the requirement in only certain states and creating the potential for patchwork enforcement across the country.</p> <p>The decision by the New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals kept a preliminary injunction in place for 14 states that had collectively sued in federal court in Louisiana. It altered a Nov. 30 ruling by U.S. District Judge Terry Doughty, who originally applied his order nationwide.</p> <p>A separate preliminary injunction on appeal before the St. Louis-based 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals applies to 10 additional states. That means the vaccine requirement for Medicare and Medicaid providers is blocked by courts in about half states but not in the other half.</p> <p>“This vaccine rule is an issue of great significance currently being litigated throughout the country. Its ultimate resolution will benefit from ‘the airing of competing views’ in our sister circuits,” the ruling from three 5th Circuit judges said.</p> <p>At issue is a rule published Nov. 5 by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid that applied to a wide range of health care providers that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding. It required their workers to receive the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by Dec. 6 and be fully vaccinated by Jan. 4. It was projected to affect more than 17 million workers in about 76,000 health care facilities as well as home health care providers.</p> <p>The agency said on Dec. 2 that it would not enforce the vaccine rule while court injunctions were in place. It was not immediately clear Wednesday whether the agency would continue to suspend the rule for all states or seek to go ahead with it in states no longer subject to the injunctions.</p> <p>About 85% of adults nationwide already have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. But Biden contends his various workforce vaccine mandates are an important step to drive up vaccination rates and contain the virus outbreak, which has killed about 800,000 people in the U.S.</p> <p>Courts that have blocked the mandates for health workers, federal contractors and medium- to-large-sized businesses all have said the Biden administration likely exceeded the executive powers spelled out in law. The administration has continued to say it is on firm legal ground.</p> <p>In upholding Doughty’s injunction for the states that sued, the 5th Circuit panel said it appears likely that opponents of the health worker vaccine mandate will prevail as the case moves through the courts. However, the panel also said there are significant differences between the health care vaccine mandate and another vaccine mandate — blocked previously in a separate ruling upheld by the 5th Circuit — that applied to all businesses employing more than 100 people.</p> <p>Among the key differences, the court said, is that “the targeted health care facilities, especially nursing homes, are where COVID-19 has posed the greatest risk.”</p> <p>Wednesday’s 5th Circuit ruling was issued by judges Leslie Southwick, nominated to the court by President George W. Bush; and James Graves and Gregg Costa, both nominated by President Barack Obama.</p> <p>The 5th Circuit decision blocks the health worker vaccine mandate in Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah and West Virginia. The separate case pending before the 8th Circuit blocks the mandate in Alaska, Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming.</p> <p>Also Wednesday, the Cincinnati-based U.S. 6th Circuit Court of Appeals said a three-judge panel — rather than the entire court — would rule on a challenge to the Biden administration’s mandate that all</p>

	<p>private employers with at least 100 workers require them to be vaccinated or wear masks and face weekly tests.</p> <p>That decision is a victory for the Biden administration, which had pushed back against efforts to have all the judges in the panel initially involved. Eleven of the 16 full-time judges in the 6th Circuit were appointed by Republicans.</p> <p>The vote in the 6th Circuit was split, with eight judges wanting the entire panel to hear the case and eight wanting it to stay with three judges. Judge Karen Nelson Moore wrote that the three-judge panel already has devoted time to the case and switching now would “subvert our normal process.”</p> <p>Chief Judge Jeffrey Sutton disagreed, arguing in a dissent, “there is something to be said for putting all hands on deck, particularly when it comes to handling the stay motion.” In his dissent, he laid out a case against the administration’s authority to issue the mandate.</p> <p>At least for now, the earlier ruling from the 5th Circuit remains in place and the broader business vaccine mandate is on hold nationwide. The federal government has asked for that order to be dissolved. Determining which judges will decide that issue could set the stage for a ruling in the matter.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Nearly all students back in school full-time
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-12-15/nearly-100-of-students-back-to-school-full-time-and-in-person
GIST	<p>Ninety-nine percent of public school fourth- and eighth-grade students are learning in person, full-time, despite roughly one-third of schools offering remote learning to at least some students, according to the first batch of data released through a new Education Department portal.</p> <p>The site, the School Pulse Panel, includes new data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics, the research arm of the department’s Institute of Education Sciences, which aims to deliver more timely and standardized information about the coronavirus pandemic’s impact on K-12 schools in the U.S.</p> <p>“These critical data expand our understanding of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the operation of U.S. public schools and how schools have responded to the pandemic,” NCES Commissioner Peggy Carr said in a statement. “It is encouraging to see that almost all public school students have returned to classrooms for in-person instruction during this academic year.”</p> <p>The top-line finding is not necessarily breaking news. For months now, both President Joe Biden and Education Secretary Miguel Cardona have been touting the fact that 99% of students are learning in-person, juxtaposing the positive statistic with a reminder that at the end of the last school year, 74% of fourth-graders and 67% of eighth-graders were enrolled full time and in person or in a hybrid model.</p> <p>“Last Christmas, our children were at risk without a COVID-19 vaccine,” Biden said earlier this month. “This Christmas, we have safe and effective vaccines for children 5 and over, with 20 million children and counting now vaccinated. Last year, a majority of our schools were closed at Christmas time. Now, 99% of our schools are open.”</p> <p>But with its portal, the government will collect extensive data on issues concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and staff – including reopening efforts, strategies to mitigate the spread of the virus, services offered for students and staff, and technology use – and it will be updated frequently.</p> <p>“The School Pulse Panel provides a snapshot on critical issues, such as the instructional mode offered by schools; enrollment counts of students using various instructional modes; strategies to address pandemic-related learning needs; safe and healthy school mitigation strategies; special education</p>

services; use of technology; and information on staffing,” NCES Associate Commissioner Chris Chapman said in a statement. “These data are essential and will support our understanding of the pandemic’s impact on American students.”

Notably, the new data shows that 99% of fourth- and eighth-grade students are attending school full time and in person in schools where 25% or less of the students enrolled are races other than white, as well as for those in schools where 76% or more of the students enrolled are races other than white – a major improvement from last school year, when the majority of schools still operating remotely or on a hybrid schedule served mostly students of color and students from low-income families.

The new data also shows that, as of September, about 39% of public schools reported over three-quarters of their staff have been vaccinated – though 24% reported not knowing the percentage of their staff who have been vaccinated. Also as of September, three-quarters of public schools reported requiring or requesting students to stay home after a possible COVID-19 exposure.

When it comes to remote learning devices, the data show that public schools are continuing to provide devices and internet access to students, with almost 70% providing internet at home to those who need it and more than 90% providing devices to students who need them. And on the heels of Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issuing a rare warning about mounting mental health crises among adolescents, the new data shows that 42% of schools are hiring new staff to focus on students’ social, emotional and mental well-being, and 86% are encouraging staff to address students’ social, emotional and mental well-being.

Yet the good news in the Education Department’s new data portal that almost 100% of students are learning in person and full time is undercut by research published this week reinforcing significant learning loss that occurred over the last two school years, especially for Black and Hispanic students, for students with disabilities and those learning English and for students from low-income families. According to a [new analysis from McKinsey](#) published Tuesday, students remain behind in both math and reading, and the gains made since the spring are uneven, with some students making up lost ground and others stalling out, further exacerbating decades-old achievement gaps.

For example, students in majority-Black schools remain five months behind where they typically are in both math and reading, the McKinsey analysis shows, while students in majority-white schools are now just two months behind where they typically are – meaning students in majority-Black schools are now 12 months behind their peers in majority-white schools, having started the pandemic nine months behind.

The findings are mirrored in [new research from NWEA](#), an assessment company, that compares the test scores of 6 million public school students in grades three to eight from fall 2021 to students in the same grade in fall of 2019 – just prior to the onset of the pandemic. Those findings show evidence of significant levels of unfinished learning, particularly in math, with historically marginalized students and students in high-poverty schools disproportionately impacted, especially in the elementary grades.

Moreover, higher achievers made gains that were more consistent with projected growth, whereas lower-achieving students were more likely to fall short of growth projections – a concerning finding that also appeared in the [most recent results from the National Assessment of Education Progress](#), which reported out such poor math and reading scores that Carr asked NCES researchers to go back and run the numbers again.

“This latest research highlights that while students are back in classrooms it does not mean that all is back to pre-pandemic normal even though there are early signs of some stabilization,” Chris Minnich, CEO of NWEA, says. “The ongoing impact continues to disrupt learning and, especially, hit our most vulnerable students.”

	“It is critical – now more than ever – that we direct funding where it is needed most and determine the necessary interventions to improve student outcomes, particularly for those who have suffered the greatest disruptions,” he says.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Claim: ex-SPD chief favored for NYPD job
SOURCE	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10315827/Former-Seattle-police-chief-Carmen-Best-suspected-not-really-run-NYPD.html
GIST	<p>The woman tipped to be the next commissioner of the New York Police Department was passed over for the job, it was claimed, after she expressed unease about whether she would really be running the show.</p> <p>Carmen Best, the former Seattle police chief, was widely believed to be the favorite for the NYPD job - among the most prestigious in U.S. policing.</p> <p>Best, 56, became one of the most familiar faces in law enforcement in 2020 and was a frequent guest on national cable TV talk shows during the unrest after George Floyd's killing.</p> <p>But she announced her abrupt retirement from the chief's job in August 2020, after City Council proposals to slash the department's budget.</p> <p>On Wednesday, the next mayor of New York City, Eric Adams, announced he had chosen Keechant Sewell, 49, instead.</p> <p>Best lost out, according to The New York Post, because she feared that she would not answer directly to Adams - himself a former NYPD captain - and would instead be reduced to speaking to his aide, Philip Banks.</p> <p>Banks serves on Adams' transition team as a senior adviser on criminal justice issues, and has been working for the past several weeks out of a sixth-floor office at the NYPD's Manhattan headquarters, One Police Plaza.</p> <p>A high-ranking police source told The Post that Best knew she wasn't 'really going to run the department.' 'Other people were going to be running things,' the source added.</p> <p>Banks surprised many when, in 2014, he rejected a promotion to be the NYPD's first deputy commissioner and instead retired.</p> <p>It later emerged that he retired one day after a federal judge approved a wire tap on Banks's phone, as part of an investigation into police corruption.</p> <p>The inquiry resulted in evidence of about \$300,000 in bank transactions that the FBI called 'indicative' of money laundering but Banks was never charged.</p> <p>Adams has repeatedly vouched for him, and said he wants him to play a key role in his administration.</p> <p>'Here you have an African American that moved up through the ranks to become the chief of this department. He was amazing at CompStat. He understands policing,' Adams said Wednesday.</p> <p>'I don't know what he wants to do with his future but I think that this city is better served with his knowledge and experience.'</p> <p>Bill de Blasio, the outgoing mayor, on Wednesday called Banks 'a very capable person' and 'certainly someone who brings a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge.'</p>

He added: 'Clearly, Eric Adams has a lot of faith in him and that's important, choosing leaders that you feel you can work well with.'

Another source told The Post: 'Everybody knows Banks is going to be running the department.'

'Carmen Best would want to be a figurehead for Philip Banks? No.'

'Carmen Best is very popular with the police community because of what she did in Seattle.'

'She didn't want her department defunded, and she left. In cops' eyes, she's a hero.'

Best told the paper: 'I respect Eric Adams' decision and I'm honored that he considered me as a finalist.'

Adams' spokesman denied that there would be any break in the chain of command between the mayor and the police commissioner.

'That is unequivocally false,' spokesman Evan Thies said.

'Mayor-elect Adams said several times, including today, that the police commissioner will report to him directly.'

The other finalist for the job was former Ivonne Roman, Newark Police Chief, according to The Post.

Adams had always said he wanted to appoint a woman to replace retiring police chief Dermot Shea, after 176 years with a man at the helm.

For the last 30 years, it has been a white man and Adams was known to want to hire a black woman.

All three finalists - Sewell, Best and Roman - were interviewed twice by Adams' transition team, with their final interviews last week, sources told The Post.

Sewell, in addition to being the first woman, will be the city's third black police commissioner after Benjamin Ward served from 1984 to 1989 under Mayor Ed Koch, and Lee Brown served from 1990 to 1992 under Mayor David Dinkins.

She is expected to take office on January 1, taking over amid an increase in violent crime and low morale amongst police officers after years of outgoing de Blasio's anti police reforms.

'I'm here to meet the moment,' Sewell told the New York Post, adding: 'I'm very humbled to even be considered for this and it's an extraordinary opportunity.'

'And I take it very seriously, the historic nature of this.'

The decision to appoint Sewell to the top-cop role was a 'gut choice' for Adams, sources told the Post, who has vowed for months to appoint a woman to the post.

'Keechant Sewell is a proven crime fighter with the experience and the emotional intelligence to deliver both the safety New Yorkers need and the justice they deserve,' Adams said in a statement to the Post.

'Chief Sewell will wake up every day laser-focused on keeping New Yorkers safe and improving our city,' he continued, 'and I am thrilled to have her at the helm of the NYPD.'

Sources said Adams was most impressed by Sewell's 'emotional intelligence' she displayed during her interview, which capped off with an hours-long press conference about an apparently unarmed black man being shot by a white cop.

People familiar with the interview process told The Post she projected a calm confidence during the fake news conference and was able to connect with the community as she spoke.

Sewell was born in Long Island City, Queens where she lived the first few years of her life in public housing.

On Wednesday she returned to the housing complex for her first official press conference, alongside Adams.

She later moved to Corona and Jamaica, Queens, where she found a mentor in a retired NYPD cop named John Wesley Pierce she called 'Pop Pop.'

Together with her father who was a US Marine, he taught her the meaning of 'service and honor.'

'He always took the time to talk to me about what it means to be a person who cared about the communities and those around them,' she said of Pierce, who retired in 1968 and died in 2017.

Sewell now lives in Valley Stream, on the border of Nassau County and Queens, and serves in the Nassau County Police Department.

In 2017, she was sworn in as Patrol Deputy Chief, and she helped create and run the police department's Professional Standards Bureau, which oversaw the agency's Internal Affairs division.

She was promoted in September 2020 to Chief of Detectives in Nassau County, becoming the first black woman to reach the rank in the county.

In November, she was also named Nassau County's Law Enforcement Person of the Year at the 47th Annual Law Enforcement Night for her work overseeing 351 uniformed officers.

'She's had a meteoric rise,' Adams' spokesman told the Post, noting that Sewell trained with the FBI to be the county's chief hostage negotiator, and received counterterrorism training at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia.

He added that Sewell also serves on the New York-New Jersey Joint Terrorism Task Force.

In a sit-down interview with the Post, Sewell said she will be 'absolutely focused on crime,' claiming 'violent crime is the number one priority.'

From November 29 to December 5, NYPD statistics show, murders were up 1.4 percent when compared to last year, and grand larceny from autos was up a whopping 14.1 percent.

A report released by the department just last week also concluded overall crime increased 21.3 percent in November 2021, when compared to November 2020, with robberies increasing 24 percent and felony assaults increasing 11 percent.

It also noted: 'Shootings have persisted in pockets of the city, increasing both in 2020 through November of 2021 to levels not seen since the mid-2000s.

'For this past November, citywide shooting incidents have experienced an uptick of 2.6 percent when compared to last year and rose 2 percent year-to-date.'

When asked how she would address the shooting epidemic, Sewell simply said: 'I want to actually take a look at what's working in the city and what's not working,' adding that she wants a 'full assessment of what's happening in the city right now' to 'come up with a strategy.'

She said she hopes the assessment can happen 'very quickly' through 'aggressive meetings scheduled both internally with the police department and the community.

'I'm hoping to kind of hit the ground running beginning January 1,' Sewell said, noting: 'I've been policing for 25 years so I've actually got some sort of grasp on what I think works and what doesn't work.'

Sewell also defended the use of undercover agents to combat gun and gang violence in her interview with the Post saying 'plain clothes units work.

'They are able to be in places where they are not able to be easily recognized and if you use a surgical approach, use well-trained officers and know what their objectives are you can get measurable results.'

Adams has vowed to bring back an anticrime unit after it was disbanded by Police Commissioner Dermot Shea last year.

But she was also reportedly critical of how plain-clothes officers work in the city, telling Adams' camp 'they were doing it wrong.'

'If you start busting heads they [the community] are never going to work with you,' Sewell said, according to a source familiar with the conversation.

She also said she supports the broken windows theory of policing, which holds that if someone commits a petty offense like smashing a window and nobody fixes it, another person may be tempted to break another window or commit a more serious crime.

'I think you have to take a look at quality of life crimes because sometimes they lead to something else,' she said.

'You have to make sure you're using the broken window theory, the enforcement of those low-level crimes, in a way that's not discriminatory, in a way that addresses the problem and doesn't actually over police it in some respect.'

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Seattle clears Ballard homeless camp again
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news-brief-newsletter/seattle-crews-clear-tents-that-resurfaced-in-ballard-after-camp-sweep
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Several homeless people returned this week and pitched tents on the sidewalk after the city recently cleared out the notorious homeless encampment at Ballard Commons park but Seattle crews promptly removed them.</p> <p>Crews with the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department were accompanied Wednesday morning by police and asked several people living in tents to move off the sidewalk along NW 57th Street.</p> <p>And the campers complied with the request.</p> <p>“The quick response sends the right message from an accountability standpoint,” said Syd Abernathy, who lives in the area.</p> <p>KOMO News counted at least six tents pitched along the perimeter of the park Tuesday along with a few that had taken root right across the street in front of the public library.</p> <p>Those tents are also gone.</p> <p>“It’s very different to see compared to see how it was in the past,” said Bryan Kelley, who also lives in the area. “Just at the speed of which everything has been moving as of late.”</p>

By all accounts, the city moved in and enforced its illegal camping rule in less than 24 hours of the first complaints being received.

“I’m a little bit surprised,” Abernathy said.

After months of [public safety concerns](#) that included [fires](#) at the Ballard encampment, [physical assaults](#) and illegal drug use, the camp at Ballard Commons was swept away but some residents weren’t sure how the city would respond if tents returned.

Pat Gilbrough, who owns Ballard Health Club just a block away, said he does not want a repeat of last time.

“It’s kind of what you expect to happen in a way,” he said.

In May 2020, municipal crews cleared out the park because of a hepatitis A outbreak but those campers returned and stayed for months.

Neighbors slammed city leaders for allowing it to flourish. This time around, however, at least 60 people were placed into housing or shelter.

Seattle City Councilman Dan Strauss said crews from the Parks and Recreation Department will be present in the area more often to monitor what’s happening.

“I don’t control the Seattle Police Department or the parks department, but it is my understanding that there will be an increase presence here,” he said during a news conference last week.

And neighbors are also being encouraged to call in complaints about tents if they see them return.

The park will remain fenced off and temporarily closed while renovations occur, a process that could take between six months and a year.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Outbreaks traced to wrestling tournaments
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3283772/covid-outbreaks-washington-high-school-wrestling/
GIST	<p>Recent high school wrestling tournaments in Washington have now been linked to multiple outbreaks of COVID-19, among vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals.</p> <p>The Washington State Department of Health is investigating the outbreaks in collaboration with local public health jurisdictions. Currently, the number of cases linked to the wrestling events is estimated to be between 80 and 90 cases, but that total may change as the investigation continues.</p> <p>Anyone who attended wrestling tournaments on Dec. 4 in Lacey, Sumner, Puyallup, and Yelm may have been exposed, state health officials say.</p> <p>“That includes wrestlers, coaches, and some family members and spectators across 20 schools that have been reported to us to date,” said Dr. Jeff Duchin, King County health officer.</p> <p>Duchin says about 80% of the positive tests are in those fully vaccinated, meaning they are mostly breakthrough cases. One person was hospitalized briefly. Dr. Duchin also says the outbreak is not limited to the four South Sound tournaments, and that people who went to seven other wrestling events are reporting COVID cases as well.</p>

	<p>The state DOH recommends that anyone who attended the events as a participant, coach, official, support staff, or spectator should monitor for symptoms and get tested. Anyone with symptoms or who tests positive should stay home from work, school, child care, and other social activities.</p> <p>Teams from 13 Washington counties were involved in the tournaments, including those from nearly every county bordering Puget Sound. A high school in Oregon also sent participants.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Phoenix: return of the 10min. eviction
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/12/15/phoenix-evictions-pandemic/
GIST	<p>PHOENIX — The city’s last eviction moratorium of the pandemic had expired and the rent forgiveness program was running out of money, so Lennie McCloskey changed into his bulletproof vest and headed out to work. He climbed into his truck and counted through his daily stack of eviction orders. “Fifteen, sixteen — jeez Louise,” he said as he stacked them on the passenger seat. He strapped an extra magazine of ammunition to his belt and picked up his radio to call dispatch.</p> <p>“Constable 33, heading out,” he said. “Looks like a busy day.”</p> <p>“Okay,” the dispatcher said. “Guess it’s back to business as usual.”</p> <p>Nobody in Phoenix was better or more practiced at the business of eviction than Lennie, who had personally removed more than 20,000 Arizonans from their homes during the past two decades as the area’s longest-serving elected constable. “Lock-’em-out Lennie,” colleagues occasionally called him, because the 65-year-old former judo champion was capable of coaxing tenants out of their homes with subtle intimidation or with grandfatherly kindness. He arrived at each apartment with treats to pacify dogs and stickers to give children. The tenants he ushered outside each day into their first moments of homelessness were often inconsolable, or defiant, or suicidal, or mentally ill, or violent and aggressive, but Lennie was calm. “You have to take your own emotions out of it,” he’d told colleagues during one national training. “It’s our job to carry out the court order.”</p> <p>Now he looked at the first address in his pile and navigated by memory toward a low-income apartment complex on the outskirts of Phoenix. There were 25 other constables across Maricopa County who spent their days carrying out evictions, but few areas were as busy as Lennie’s district, a six-by-six-mile grid of discount shopping centers and faded stucco apartments that catered to working-class families. The average rent had gone up by 40 percent since the beginning of the pandemic, and now some of the apartment complexes had wait lists and new names like Canyon Oasis, Chateau Gardens, Desert Lakes and Paradise Palms. Lennie pulled up to the leasing office of a 300-unit building and carried his stack of eviction orders inside to the property manager.</p> <p>“Looks like you’re getting rid of four here today?” he said.</p> <p>“Should be five,” the property manager told him. “Moratorium’s over, but nobody wants to pay.”</p> <p>“Well, some might want to,” Lennie said.</p> <p>She shrugged. “They didn’t, and I got a list of new people ready to write checks.”</p> <p>“Understood,” Lennie said, and she pointed him toward the first apartment on his list, a basement unit next to an empty swimming pool. He put on his heavy-duty gloves, felt for his holstered firearm and knocked on the door. “Hello! Maricopa County constable,” he said. Inside he could hear whispering, a dog barking, and then silence.</p> <p>He leaned against the door and listened to the sound of footsteps shuffling across the floor. For much of the past 20 months, Lennie had been working to keep people in their homes during the pandemic, brokering deals between landlords and tenants and connecting both sides with federal assistance programs</p>

during the moratorium, but lately he was back to doing several dozen evictions each week. It wasn't yet the post-pandemic tsunami of evictions that some had predicted but rather a return to normal — except normal seemed different to Lennie now, more relentless and unpredictable. Landlords acted increasingly impatient after months of falling behind on their collections. Tenants were more resistant to leaving their homes after months of government assistance. And Lennie could feel his own behavior shifting, too, in ways he was still trying to understand. "It's not like I've gone soft, but maybe a little bit more lenient," he said. "More compassionate or understanding."

He waited at the entryway for a few more seconds, took out his baton, and started banging on the door.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Maricopa County peace officer! Open up now!"

Lennie had done more than 300 evictions since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's federal moratorium expired in early August, and during that time he'd given up on predicting who might come to the door. In the past several months, he'd evicted a 93-year-old from a retirement facility, a group of drug addicts living in an apartment cluttered with bowls of counterfeit cash, a man claiming to be a "sovereign citizen" above the law who barricaded himself inside the apartment, a laid-off restaurant worker, a schizophrenic, a hoarder, a recent Somali refugee, a man with a pet reindeer, a woman who tried hiding inside her dresser cabinet, and six families living in a two-bedroom apartment subdivided by drapes and shower curtains.

But no matter who he found waiting inside, Lennie's job remained the same: to search the home, force everyone out and change the locks — all within a government-recommended time of about 10 minutes.

Now the apartment door swung open in front of him, and this time what Lennie saw was a shirtless, middle-aged man holding a half-eaten bowl of cereal. The dark apartment behind him was cluttered with cardboard boxes, broken furniture and open piles of trash. "Can I help you?" the man asked.

"Good morning," Lennie said. "I'm here because I have a court order that says by law I need to evict you out of here."

The man glanced at Lennie's badge and then down at his gun. "Uh-huh. Okay," he said. He took a few bites of cereal while Lennie waited.

"Sorry, but we don't have much time," Lennie said.

"Oh, you mean I'm getting evicted today?" the man said. "Right now?"

Lennie nodded. "You can make an appointment with the landlord to come get your things later, but we only have a few minutes before we change the locks. Grab any essentials you can't live without."

The tenant stepped into the living room, and Lennie followed him inside to search the apartment. The ceiling was covered with graffiti. The plaster walls were pockmarked with large dents and holes. A woman was hiding behind the bathroom door, and she came out as Lennie walked by. "Hello, ma'am," he said, and she scowled back at him.

"Just the essentials," Lennie repeated. "Medications. Pets. Walking shoes. Photo albums. Car keys. A change of clothes."

The tenants began stuffing T-shirts into a backpack. Lennie checked his watch as the building's maintenance worker started to change the locks. "We about ready?" Lennie asked the tenants a few moments later, and when nobody answered he tried again. "Time to wrap up," he said, and eventually the tenants walked out of the apartment with the backpack, a Chihuahua, a small TV and a box fan.

“Good luck,” Lennie said as he closed the door behind them. He locked the deadbolt. He shook the door handle to test the new lock. He looked down at his watch: nine minutes.

“Okay. One down,” he told the maintenance worker. “Who’s next?”

It was a teenage couple, seated side by side on a mattress in their living room and playing video games. “Sorry. Only the essentials,” Lennie said, and six minutes later they walked out with nothing but cellphone chargers and their PlayStation.

Next was an empty apartment, where Lennie walked inside and found a child’s bedroom still intact: a plastic basketball hoop, a dozen withered balloons, a wall poster of Kobe Bryant, a fish tank with three goldfish circling against the glass. “All clear,” Lennie told the maintenance worker. “Lock it up.”

Next it was a mother and her two children, ages 6 and 13, gathered in front of their dryer. “I need to finish this load,” the mother told Lennie, and he nodded and reached into his pocket for a referral card to a local shelter. “Maybe they can help,” Lennie said.

“I tried that,” she said. “I tried everything.”

“Do you have anywhere to go?” he asked.

“Does it matter?”

“The law says I have to carry out this order,” Lennie said. “But yeah. It matters to me.”

She grabbed the load of laundry and pointed her kids to a Toyota in the parking lot. “We’ll be in the car for a few days,” she said.

Eight minutes. Eleven minutes. Four minutes. Six minutes. “They’re over fast but sometimes you keep thinking about them,” Lennie said as he climbed back into his truck and headed toward his ninth eviction of the morning, at a newer apartment complex. He pulled into the parking lot and ate a power bar. He sat in the car for an extra moment with his mask off, taking deep breaths, but then the property manager came up to his window and waved.

“Here for the eviction?” she asked, and Lennie nodded, handed her the court order, and pointed to the apartment number.

“Tell me they moved out already,” he said. “Tell me it’s an easy one.”

He followed the property manager through the courtyard to a two-bedroom apartment with an entry mat that read: “Welcome! Friends Gather Here.” On the porch Lennie noticed a small collection of toy trucks and a child’s fairy garden built from straw dolls and succulent plants. “Oh no,” he said, and he shut his eyes for a moment and then knocked, until a man wearing a collared shirt and a carrying briefcase answered the door.

“Hi,” Lennie said. “Ricardo Hernandez?”

“Yes, sir. Can I help you? I’m just leaving for work.”

“I’m sorry to say I’ve got a court order for eviction. I’m here to ask you to leave.”

A little girl came up from behind Ricardo and grabbed onto his leg. Lennie waved to her. She looked up at his bulletproof vest and then hid behind her father and started to cry. “Oh no. It’s okay, sweetheart,”

Lennie said. He reached into his pocket and felt beyond the handcuff keys and the flashlight and the absorbent medical gauze for his collection of sheriff-badge stickers, and then he held one out toward her.

“Come on, really?” Ricardo said, glaring first at the sticker and then at Lennie.

Lennie shrugged. “Kids love stickers,” he said, and the girl took it and put it on her dress. Lennie gave her a thumbs-up and turned back to Ricardo.

“I know this is hard,” he said. “We’ll give you a few minutes to get your personal items.”

“We’ve got three kids,” Ricardo said. “We’ve been here three years and never caused any trouble. Our rent was getting paid, but I’ve been late because of this whole pandemic.”

“And I believe you,” Lennie said. “But, unfortunately, that doesn’t stop the eviction.”

“I have the money,” Ricardo said.

Lennie looked down at the eviction paperwork. “Says here the judgment is for \$2,300.”

“I’m telling you, I have the money,” Ricardo said, and Lennie nodded and looked at him for a long moment.

For his entire career he’d been listening to tenants offer excuses and beg for more time, and usually Lennie’s answer had been the same. Rent had to be paid on schedule. The eviction order had already been filed. The law was the law. His job was to execute the order. “Sorry, Charlie,” he had sometimes told tenants, but now he looked beyond Ricardo into the home and saw a baby rolling around in a pack-and-play in the living room and a framed photograph on the wall of a family of five sitting on a tree branch in matching flannel shirts. The locksmith stood next to Lennie on the porch, twirling a drill in his hands. Lennie stepped back from the doorway and then smiled.

“Okay,” he said. “If the property manager lets you pay up now, I’m good with that. That would be good for everybody.”

“Thanks,” Ricardo said, and he peeled his daughter off his leg and walked toward the rental office as he told Lennie about everything that had happened to his family during the pandemic. He’d lost his job as a general manager at a restaurant and scrambled to find work at Costco, but then the new baby arrived, and then the property company had sent a letter saying their rent was going up by \$200 per month because of “increased demand.” Ricardo had tried to make up the gap by starting a commercial cleaning company, but some of his clients had been slow to pay as his October rent went into default and his November bill came due.

“Believe it or not, I’ve been there,” Lennie said, and he told Ricardo about how his side business as an electrician had suffered during the economic collapse in 2008, just as he and his wife were preparing to adopt a son. He’d fallen so far behind on his mortgage that one afternoon he’d returned home from a day of doing evictions to find a foreclosure notice taped to his own front door, and then he’d barely scrambled together enough money in savings and loans to keep his home.

“We’re all a few bad breaks away,” Lennie told the property manager as they sat down in her office. “If Ricardo here is able to pay up in full, can he stay?”

The manager looked at Ricardo and sighed. “We’ve been trying to contact you since October. Emails. Knocking on your door. Letters. Offers of payment plans. We’ve been more than fair.”

“I’m always working,” Ricardo said.

“Okay, so there’s been some bad communication,” Lennie said. “But, if he’s still able to take care of it?”

“At this point he’d have to pay late fees and also all of December,” the property manager said. She started to punch numbers into a calculator while Ricardo took out his phone and sent messages to clients who owed him money. Lennie smoothed the creases out of his pants and glanced up at the clock. Eighteen minutes already. Twenty. “All right, here’s the total,” the property manager finally said, and she wrote it down on a sticky note and held it up so Ricardo could see: \$6,130.78. “It needs to be a cashier’s check,” she said.

“Whoa. Come on. It’s, it’s just —” Ricardo said, trying to gather himself. “It’s just very challenging to get that much money right now.”

“How about 24 hours?” Lennie suggested, looking at the property manager. “I don’t need to be the bad guy here. If you want to give him a day, I can be flexible. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“It’ll be the same situation,” she said.

“Sure. Could be,” Lennie said. “But who knows? Maybe you get more with honey than with vinegar.”

She drummed a pen against her desk and looked at Ricardo for a moment. “Fine. Twenty-four hours,” she said, and Ricardo clapped his hands together and went outside to make phone calls. Lennie gathered up his eviction papers and stood to leave.

“Thanks for working with him,” he said.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” she said. “I don’t know how you do this every day.”

He was used to people assuming his job was unbearable, but the truth was that despite its heartaches, dangers and starting salary of \$48,000, Lennie mostly enjoyed being a constable. It had introduced him to hidden corners of the city and to all kinds of people, including a community of local constables who had become some of his closest friends. They got together each week for breakfast, so one morning Lennie pulled into a diner to join a group of his colleagues before they all started their shifts.

The constables at the table were elected to office by their own local districts, which made for a diverse group. Most of them were Republican, like Lennie, but some were Democrats. One was a landlord who had lost rental income during the pandemic; another had a background in social work and tenants’ rights. Many were former police officers who carried handguns; a few preferred to dress like civilians and carry only clipboards, for their paperwork. But lately all of them came to commiserate about a job that had become more fraught and unpredictable during the past few months.

“So, I walk into this apartment the other day, and the guy’s loading an AK-47,” one constable said. “I couldn’t understand half of what he was saying. Just gibberish.”

“I swear the pandemic’s made everyone mental,” another constable said. “They think their world is ending.”

“In some ways it is,” Lennie said. “If we’re there, it’s probably the worst day of their lives.”

“You have to help them see a tomorrow.”

“You have to get them out of the house.”

It was a familiar debate among the constables — empathy vs. enforcement — and more and more Lennie found himself stuck somewhere in between. Some constables thought tenants had taken advantage of the moratorium, and it was true that Lennie had gone to apartments during the pandemic where tenants acted

as if they were above the law, damaging property and spending their rental assistance on flat-screen TVs and new cars while their landlords suffered. But, much more often, he had encountered renters who were newly jobless, working from home, grieving, terrified of the virus, or already sick as they exhausted their savings to pay what little they could.

“A lot of people are still playing catch-up,” he said. “They have good intentions.”

“It’s about treating them with kindness and respect,” another constable said.

“But, as a taxpayer, there’s a part of me that says: Why are we wasting my money to help deadbeats?” a retired constable said. “Maybe it’s their own fault they can’t pay.”

“They don’t have two brain cells to rub together,” another said. “Some of these people can’t be helped.”

“But maybe some can,” Lennie said, and a few minutes later he paid the bill and left for his shift.

The manager of a Glendale condominium complex enters a unit as an eviction order is served. The unit was empty, with an air mattress blocking the entrance. (Adriana Zehbrauskas for the Washington Post) Another and her autistic child in a ransacked one-bedroom. A vacant apartment with 49 empty bottles of Corona scattered across the floor. A woman who offered to pay with fake money and then lunged at Lennie, until he tackled and restrained her. “You’re a tool of capitalistic corruption!” she shouted at him as he pinned her to the floor. “You dogging the American people. You’re killing us. You’re a monster. How do you people sleep?” But within 10 minutes Lennie had gotten her calmed down and out the front door, and then he navigated back toward Ricardo’s apartment complex to see whether he had paid.

“Did we get a happy ending?” he asked the property manager.

“Depends,” she said, and then she explained that she’d received no payment and no more information from Ricardo, so she’d already rented out his unit, increasing the price from \$1,700 to \$2,200, and a new tenant had snapped it up within 15 minutes. “Demand right now is off the chain,” she said. “We need him out. We need to proceed.” Lennie sighed, nodded and followed the locksmith back down the gravel pathways to Ricardo’s porch.

“They’re ready to go ahead with the order,” he said once Ricardo came to the door.

“I tried to call them,” Ricardo said, and his wife joined him in the doorway. Her eyes were red, and the baby was fussing in her arms. “We’re good for the money,” she said. “We actually got it, but then somebody hacked into the bank account, so now it’s frozen, and they changed the account number, and I’m waiting for the new one, and—”

Ricardo cut in: “Six-thousand is a lot. We just need a little more time.”

Lennie winced and shook his head. “Management already rented it out, but we’ll give you 10 minutes to grab some essentials,” he said.

Ricardo crossed his arms, stared at Lennie for a moment, and then nodded. “Okay. Ten minutes,” he said, and then he began hurrying through the house to find all the essentials necessary for a 7-year-old, a 4-year-old, a 1-year-old and a dog.

He went to the bedroom to pack diapers, wipes, shoes and toiletries. His wife went to the refrigerator for milk, snacks and baby food. “What if the whole damn kitchen is essential?” she asked as she threw open cabinets and slammed them shut. The 4-year-old came into the kitchen carrying her leftover Halloween candy, two stuffed animals and her roller skates. “What about my TV?” she asked Ricardo, and he leaned down to squeeze her shoulder and shook his head. “It’s too big. We’ll get it later,” he said, and she started

to cry. Ricardo offered her his cellphone to distract her. Lennie held out another sticker, and the girl took it and looked up at him. “Don’t watch my TV,” she told him. “Don’t change the channel. Don’t sleep in my bed.”

Five minutes. Six. “We need more time,” Ricardo said, cursing to himself, but to Lennie the final 10 minutes inside someone else’s home usually felt interminable. There was little for him to do and nothing helpful he could say, so he stood in a corner and tried to make polite conversation as he encouraged things along.

“I like this lamp,” he told Ricardo.

“Huh?” Ricardo said, as he came out of the bathroom carrying five toothbrushes and then followed Lennie’s gaze to a floor lamp in the living room. “Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Costco,” Ricardo said as he packed the toothbrushes into a travel case.

“No kidding?” Lennie said. “I should go get one of those.”

“I’ll sell it to you,” Ricardo said. “How about \$6,200?”

Nine minutes. Ten. Ricardo grabbed car seats, dog food and his gun safe and carried them outside to the porch. Twelve minutes. Fifteen. “I’m trying not to rush you, but unfortunately we don’t have a whole lot more time,” Lennie said.

“Shoes!” Ricardo reminded his wife. “Pajamas! Pack-and-play!” She started to fold up the crib and then saw a pile of crackers left behind on the floor. She grabbed a broom and started to sweep it up.

“That’s okay,” Lennie said. “You don’t need to do that.”

“I can’t help myself,” she said, and she started to cry. Lennie stood against the wall, watching her, trying to think of something to say. “You ever hear about those robot vacuums?” he asked, finally. “They just go around and keep the dust out and everything.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. She finished sweeping, folded the crib and tossed it onto the porch with the rest of the essentials. Ricardo carried the children outside, and Lennie locked the door and walked with them toward their truck.

“This is just wrong,” Ricardo told him as he started the engine. “It’s ridiculous. It’s cruel. It’s barbaric.”

“I’m sorry,” Lennie said, but the moratorium was over and that meant it was also routine. He watched them drive away, double-checked the locks, and then continued to the next address on his list.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 Rising frustration China virus restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/16/china-omicron-covid-holidays-olympics/
GIST	<p>All year, Shirley Zhang — a translator in Hangzhou, China — has been looking forward to going home to Xi’an for Lunar New Year, when small things such as running errands for her parents or catching up on neighborhood gossip fill her with joy. Last year, because of the pandemic, she spent the holiday in her adopted city with friends, heeding government calls not to travel.</p> <p>“The meaning of new year is getting together with family. This kind of happiness isn’t the same as with friends,” said the 29-year-old. “We all hope to go home.”</p>

For the third year in a row, millions of people such as Zhang are likely to miss out on Lunar New Year, the most anticipated holiday on the Chinese calendar, as the omicron variant breaches China's stringent covid-19 defenses and prompts even more severe restrictions ahead of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Authorities this week [detected the country's first omicron cases](#) — one in the port city of Tianjin, close to Beijing, and another in the southern manufacturing hub of Guangzhou. Both municipal governments have rushed to halt transmission with targeted tracing, mass testing and lockdowns.

Even before the new variant's arrival, officials were tightening border controls and discouraging residents from traveling over the holiday that begins on Jan. 31 and ends, officially, on Feb. 6. In Zhejiang province, the site of a new outbreak of almost 300 cases, more than half a million people have been ordered to stay home and another 100,000 have been sent to quarantine facilities.

China, one of the last countries to maintain a "zero covid" policy, has insisted on the merits of its approach, from [locking down entire theme parks](#), residential blocks and schools when a single case is detected, to quarantining incoming travelers for up to six weeks.

But as residents prepare to spend another Spring Festival, as the holiday is known, without their families, the costs of China's zero-covid policy have come to the fore, sparking frustration over how long ordinary citizens can be expected to put their lives on hold.

Deng Juanjuan, a 34-year-old English teacher in Beijing, and her husband, an IT engineer at a state-owned securities company, will be "celebrating in place," as local officials have been encouraging. "We were told that it's not a mandate, but strongly recommended," she said, referring to instructions from her husband's company. Deng's husband had planned to go home to Hunan province to visit his mother, who lives alone.

"It's depressing to see the restrictions go on and on, and there is no escape. When is our life going to be normal again?" Deng said.

For many of China's 370 million migrant workers, the Lunar New Year is their only chance to visit family for an extended break.

"How many three years are there in a person's life?" one user on the microblog Weibo asked. "Families reuniting for new year has been a tradition for thousands of years. For us, this is as important as defending against the pandemic."

"When you asked us to get booster shots, I complied. Nucleic acid tests, I also complied. But three years of not going home is too much," another wrote.

Other residents such as Zhang say they accept the containment measures but wonder whether the current approach can last. "Zero covid is really difficult. People have to follow all kinds of restrictions. You can require that of one person, of 10 people, but you can't demand that of 1 billion people," she said.

Citing the risk of omicron spreading, officials in Taiyuan in Shanxi province on Wednesday called on those working for government or state-owned companies to "set an example" and forgo trips home for the holidays.

Langzhong city in Sichuan province on Sunday published an open letter calling on migrant workers not to return unless necessary. In Yulin, in Guangxi province, authorities suggested substituting a trip with video calls. Officials in Shanghai called on residents to cancel nonessential trips.

Additional measures have been taken to prevent omicron from disrupting the Winter Games. Beijing has asked travelers from about a dozen locations deemed risky to report to local health officials on their

return to the capital. In Zhangjiakou, 45 minutes from Beijing by high-speed rail, government workers, state company employees and civil servants in an Olympics development zone were asked to cancel nonessential trips over Lunar New Year.

The announcements sparked criticism even in state-run outlets. Hu Xijin, the editor of the Global Times, warned in a post on Sunday against “rashly” asking people to forgo visits to loved ones.

“It’s obvious that the pandemic will not disappear in the short term ... but life must continue, the economy must continue,” he wrote. The point of the zero-covid approach, he added, is “to minimize the costs of pandemic measures, not disregard the costs.”

“As the pandemic lengthens, it is necessary to consider people’s psychological endurance. In the context of the pandemic, Spring Festival is also a kind of therapy,” an editorial in Beijing News said on Wednesday.

Over the summer, China’s rising vaccination rates and the arrival of the delta variant sparked a debate about whether it was time to join other nations in gradually opening borders.

After pushback and official studies arguing that border relaxation would rapidly lead to more cases than China had faced in Wuhan in early 2020, few experts have since argued for changing course.

The arrival of omicron is likely to reinforce that resolve. Tianjin has set up omicron-only quarantine areas in designated hospitals. In Guangzhou, more than 1,000 people deemed close contacts or suspected close contacts of the infected individual have been placed in centralized quarantine.

Health officials argue that the zero-covid strategy remains the most cost-effective for China. Liang Wannian, head of the National Health Commission’s team for the covid-19 response, told a briefing last week that the “dynamic” approach was not aiming for total eradication of local transmission, which was now impossible, but rather to break new transmission chains as quickly as possible.

“‘Dynamic zero-tolerance’ is not lying flat,” he said, referring to a [trend](#), discouraged by the government, of young Chinese taking it easy in the face of social pressure. “It’s not just letting the epidemic grow, but rather controlling it, cutting it off.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 DOH: 796,369 cases, 9635 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256636486.html?ac_cid=DM579746&ac_bid=-1647853746
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 1,487 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday and three deaths since Monday.</p> <p>As of Wednesday, statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are 796,369 cases and 9,635 deaths. The case total includes 96,736 infections listed as probable. Death data is considered complete only through Nov. 28. DOH revises previous case and death counts daily.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Tukwila bridge closes indefinitely; damaged
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/fallen-cargo-blocks-damages-busy-tukwila-bridge/
GIST	<p>The future of a busy Duwamish River crossing is in doubt after a truckload struck the steel bridge in Tukwila’s Allentown neighborhood Wednesday, prompting an indefinite shutdown.</p> <p>Coils of cable spilled onto the two-lane deck during the incident, which occurred shortly after 11 a.m. Those were soon cleared away, but traffic will remain blocked by orange cones until inspectors can examine the structural damage.</p>

Some 3,000 trucks and 7,000 cars cross on busy days. The bridge, built in 1949, serves a huge BNSF Railway yard, nestled between a residential area and Interstate 5, along with small storage yards and businesses.

The green bridge — crossing the river on 42nd Avenue South, close to Highway 599 — has a “fracture critical” design, meaning a failure of one key beam or joint may trigger a chain reaction collapse, as occurred when a tall load broke one span of the Interstate 5 Skagit River Bridge in 2013.

Tukwila city officials haven’t said whether they consider the bridge repairable. Photos show at least one overhead brace was bent, along with at least two side beams in the steel truss.

The bridge will remain closed to vehicular traffic until further notice, City Administrator David Cline said in an email Wednesday.

The King County bridge inspection team will be on-site Thursday to perform an inspection, he said. “Until that inspection is complete, we can’t speculate on next steps,” he said. “Once we know more we will share the information with the broader community, along with our plans moving forward.”

Tukwila already expects to replace the old crossing by 2025, for at least \$22 million. The City Council authorized an engineering firm last month to complete a full design. The contract instructions called for a temporary detour bridge nearby, during roughly two years of construction.

The old bridge is rated structurally deficient in the National Bridge Inventory. Inspectors this spring cataloged pervasive “pack rust” within the beams, and within the riveted connections between beams, known as gusset plates. Portions of the concrete foundations are crumbling.

The load of cables strewn on the road Wednesday was being delivered to nearby Sunset Machinery to be resold, said owner Joseph Anderson. The cables were brought to his storage yard by the afternoon, he said.

Anderson said he couldn’t comment about the incident until he can sort through the varying details he has heard.

Resident Sally Blake, co-founder of the group Allentown Advocates, said that shortly after the incident, she saw trucks lined up back to South 124th Street — a 25 mph arterial between a residential area and the Tukwila Community Center ballfield.

BNSF Railway expects to continue normal operations, though truckers must take longer routes using local streets to reach the yard, said spokesperson Lena Kent. Many truckers are detouring to BNSF through a wood-timbered I-5 overpass, which she said “is not ideal” because of its steep slope, between the hilly Skyway neighborhood and the riverside.

The bridge clearance, which is not marked by signs, is 14 1/2 feet at the edges and generally 15 feet. Over the years, less serious truck hits have left some dings on overhead crossbeams, known as sway braces. In the Skagit River bridge collapse, the force on sway braces yanked against the main truss work, causing beams to bend inward.

Overhead truck impacts are common. Washington state recorded at least 135 from 2015 to mid-2018.

“There’s always been a possibility this could have happened,” said David Shumate, who lives next to a pair of other Duwamish bridges. Shumate said it’s sad to see the potential demise of the old green span, which he calls “a cool little bridge.”

After the Skagit River bridge collapse, the Washington State Department of Transportation cut out its overhead sway braces and built new ones 18 feet high, recognizing some truckers would cross the bridge with high loads.

	In recent months, neighbors near the Duwamish River crossing have aired grievances against the city, insisting trucks be rerouted to a new road north of the rail yard or a different bridge south of the rail yard near I-5, rather than the planned replacement on 42nd Avenue South. Such a reroute would improve safety while reducing noise and pollution, they say. Tukwila's 2022 budget provides \$1.3 million for a new Allentown Truck Reroute Project study.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 More omicron cases; 'explosively fast'
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/eight-new-omicron-cases-confirmed-throughout-multiple-counties-in-washington-state/
GIST	<p>Public health officials on Wednesday announced the discovery of more coronavirus cases involving the omicron variant in Washington state, indicating substantial community spread of the variant across the region.</p> <p>The news comes as researchers are rushing to find out the implications of omicron, which was first identified in South Africa and has spread "explosively fast" in other places, such as the U.K., health officials said. Earlier this week, top U.S. officials warned an omicron surge could peak with a wave of infections as soon as January — and health experts are renewing a push for vaccinations and booster shots.</p> <p>Now, Washington state officials are meeting to discuss potential changes to guidance around COVID-19.</p> <p>At least 12 omicron cases have been confirmed across Washington, including three new cases connected to high school wrestling tournaments on Dec. 4, though few additional details were immediately available. Last week, King County confirmed five other omicron cases. Information was only available for three of those infected people, none of whom had been hospitalized, county health officer Dr. Jeff Duchin said Wednesday.</p> <p>The three infected people reported recent travel within the United States, but none has traveled internationally, meaning omicron is circulating locally, Duchin said. The three were fully vaccinated, and one had received a booster dose.</p> <p>There's no evidence yet that the group of five King County cases are linked to one other, or to the first case of omicron identified in the county, which was announced in early December.</p> <p>At least one omicron case each has been reported in Pierce, Thurston and Whatcom counties, though health officials and researchers say the total statewide number is likely much higher.</p> <p>"Although delta currently makes up the vast majority of cases in King County and regionally, omicron virus spreads explosively fast," Duchin said. "I expect we'll see a rapid increase in omicron in the coming days and weeks."</p> <p>Tournaments fuel outbreaks</p> <p>The three new King County cases announced Wednesday are connected to multiple COVID cases traced to high school wrestling tournaments in Lacey, Sumner, Puyallup and Yelm earlier this month.</p> <p>State epidemiologist Dr. Scott Lindquist said Wednesday over 80 infections have been traced back to participating wrestling teams, and is expecting the number to increase as sequencing and contact tracing continues. The infections span at least 20 schools just in King County, Duchin said.</p> <p>Photos and videos of the tournaments show people crowded in bleachers without masks, flouting masking requirements, Lindquist said. The state Department of Health guidance for athletics and K-12 school environments requires anyone not actively participating in a sport to be wearing a mask, and also requires regular testing for unvaccinated athletes in high-contact sports.</p>

With the emergence of omicron, however, local and state public health officials in Washington are meeting Wednesday to discuss whether they need to revise the guidelines, he said.

Lindquist did not mention any specific recommendations that may be on the table.

The department urges anyone who attended these tournaments to watch for symptoms and get a coronavirus test. Local health jurisdictions are also likely to notify the affected schools to offer further guidance, according to the DOH.

“It’s really important to understand we don’t have all the answers about omicron currently, and a lot remains uncertain about how this variant will affect us,” Duchin said. “But we do know enough about omicron to take it very seriously and to take steps to decrease our risk.”

Tracking a spike-protein mutation

As of this week, researchers around the world have found increasing evidence that the new variant is “significantly” more transmissible than the delta variant, and also spreads primarily through the air in indoor spaces, Duchin said.

“The number of cases in several countries that recognized omicron earlier than the U.S. is doubling every two or three days,” he added.

Early evidence shows strong signs the new variant is also spreading quickly in the state, according to the University of Washington’s virology lab, which has been sequencing the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic.

To find signs of the variant, the lab — like many others in the U.S. — has started running all positive samples through a particular PCR test that searches for a mutation called spike gene target failure, or a small deletion in the omicron variant’s spike protein.

“It’s an early indicator of which samples might be omicron, by virtue of the fact that they bear a very specific mutation, which allows us to pick them up,” said Pavitra Roychoudhury, acting instructor in the University of Washington’s department of laboratory medicine and pathology and a researcher in the school’s virology lab.

[As of Wednesday morning](#), Roychoudhury said about 20% of all positive coronavirus samples have the spike-gene mutation, meaning about a fifth might be omicron. Last week, about 13% of samples had the mutation, [Roychoudhury said on Twitter](#).

While the mutation doesn’t definitively identify the variant — confirmation is done through genetic sequencing — the lab can use the spike-gene mutation as a “proxy for an approximate number of omicron cases in the population,” Roychoudhury said.

Roychoudhury said she and her team previously used the assay in January, to search for the alpha variant, which shares a similar mutation to omicron.

“It certainly suggests that this is a highly transmissible variant given that we’re detecting this increasing percent of these cases over time,” she said. “But how this is going to hold up against delta in our specific geographic region is something that remains to be seen.”

The high transmissibility shouldn’t be a “cause for panic,” since it doesn’t necessarily mean increased severity, Roychoudhury said. Instead, she said she hopes knowing that might motivate people to change certain habits, such as masking and distancing.

“Disappointing setback”

	<p>Duchin during the Wednesday briefing also renewed a push for vaccinations and boosters, which early data shows offer protection against serious illness from the omicron variant, even if they're not as effective against infection.</p> <p>"Everyone should be prepared for eventually many of us being infected," Duchin said. "Being infected doesn't mean getting seriously ill."</p> <p>In addition to getting vaccinated and boosted, recommended layered prevention methods include wearing fitted masks, improving indoor air ventilation and air quality, distancing and avoiding "high-risk environments."</p> <p>Even if serious illness is rare in omicron cases, a large number of people falling sick in a short period of time could be a problem for the state's already overburdened health care system, as well as businesses and companies that rely on having a consistent number of employees show up, Duchin said.</p> <p>"The emergence of omicron is a disappointing setback in where we hoped to be two years into this pandemic," he said. "Despite this, we're not going back to square one of the pandemic. We have effective vaccines to prevent serious illness and we know what works to prevent COVID-19 spread in the community. And overtime, I'm confident that increasing immunity from vaccination and some exposure to the virus will make COVID-19 less and less of a threat."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Colleges again thwarted seeking normalcy
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/colleges-go-back-to-drawing-board-again-to-fight-virus/
GIST	<p>Facing rising infections and a new COVID-19 variant, colleges across the U.S. have once again been thwarted in seeking a move to normalcy and are starting to require booster shots, extend mask mandates, limit social gatherings and, in some cases, revert to online classes.</p> <p>The threat of the omicron variant comes as a gut punch to schools that were hoping to relax safety measures this spring. Now, many are telling students to prepare for another term of masking, testing and, if cases get bad, limits around social life.</p> <p>Cornell University abruptly shut down all campus activities on Tuesday and moved final exams online after more than 700 students tested positive over three days. In a campus message, President Martha Pollack said there was evidence of the omicron variant in a "significant" number of samples.</p> <p>"It is obviously extremely dispiriting to have to take these steps," Pollack wrote. "However, since the start of the pandemic, our commitment has been to follow the science and do all we can to protect the health of our faculty, staff and students.</p> <p>Hours later, Princeton University moved its exams online and urged students to leave campus "at their earliest convenience" amid a rise in cases. On Wednesday, New York University canceled all non-academic events and encouraged professors to move finals online.</p> <p>Cornell, Princeton and NYU all report student vaccination rates of more than 98%.</p> <p>After a fall with few coronavirus cases, officials at Syracuse University were "feeling pretty good" about the spring term, said Kent Syverud, the upstate New York school's chancellor.</p> <p>"But omicron has changed that," Syverud said. "It has made us go back and say, until we know more about this variant for sure, we're going to have to reinstate some precautions."</p> <p>Last week, Syracuse announced that all eligible students and employees must get COVID-19 booster shots before the spring term. Students will also face a round of virus tests when they return, and officials are weighing whether to extend an existing mask mandate.</p>

Much is still unknown about the omicron variant and how big of a threat it poses. In the United States and many other nations, the delta variant is currently responsible for most COVID-19 cases.

But as colleges brace for the worst, many see boosters as their best hope. More than 30 colleges have issued booster shot requirements in recent weeks, and others say they're thinking about it. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is encouraging boosters for people ages 17 and older, and Pfizer last week announced that a booster of its COVID-19 vaccine might offer important protection against omicron even though the initial two doses appear less effective.

Hundreds of colleges already require COVID-19 vaccines, and some say boosters are an obvious next step.

Most booster mandates so far have come from small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast, but the list includes some as big as Boston University and NYU, and as far away as the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and the University of New Mexico.

The University of Massachusetts in Amherst was among the first to require the booster for students, saying all students must get shots unless they have medical or religious exemptions.

"The boosters are our best protection," said Jeffrey Hescok, co-director of the university's Public Health Promotion Center. "This demonstrates that we take public health seriously, and our students do too."

A recent online petition arguing against the booster mandate — citing 97% of students vaccinated and few on-campus cases — has attracted a few dozen signatures. But Emily O'Brien, a freshman at UMass, said the booster shot is a reasonable demand. She was already planning on getting a booster but said the mandate will probably increase uptake among students and prevent future lockdowns.

"If the past six months have shown anything, it's that lots of people won't bother to get vaccines — especially younger healthy people — if they don't have a requirement to," said O'Brien, 18, of Bedford, New Hampshire.

UMass will also require masks at the start of spring term, and it's sending students home with a rapid test to be taken near the end of winter break.

Many colleges are planning for potential disruption next semester even as they contend with outbreaks now.

Middlebury College in Vermont switched to remote instruction last week amid a surge in cases and urged students to leave early for winter break. Rising cases at the University of Pennsylvania led to a ban on indoor social events last Thursday.

On Friday, Tulane University in New Orleans warned that a campus spike includes probable cases of the omicron variant, confirmed in at least one student last week. In response, school officials reinstated a mask mandate and expanded virus testing.

Some other schools are already postponing the return to campus next month to avoid outbreaks. Southern New Hampshire University and DePaul University in Chicago recently said students will take classes remotely for two weeks before returning to campus after the holidays.

In a letter to students, DePaul's president, A. Gabriel Esteban, said the school will "cautiously start winter quarter so we can sustain a robust college experience the remainder of the academic year."

When students at Stanford University return to campus in January, they will be barred from holding parties or other big gatherings for two weeks. They'll also be tested once a week and continue to wear masks indoors as requirements to attend in-person classes. The measures aim to limit virus transmission without going too far in limiting the college experience, said Russell Furr, associate vice provost for environmental health and safety.

	<p>“This is something we’ve grappled with throughout the pandemic — how do we get a balanced approach?” Furr said. The goal is to avoid the strict lockdowns seen early in the pandemic, when student mental health “really suffered,” he added.</p> <p>At some colleges, there’s still cautious hope for a normal semester. Leaders at the University of Central Florida told professors they can require in-person attendance in the spring, which had been discouraged this fall amid a surge in delta cases.</p> <p>In a campus message, interim provost Michael D. Johnson warned that if the omicron variant takes off, “we may need to change direction yet again.”</p> <p>Another concern is omicron’s timing — even without a new variant, there were worries of more outbreaks as colder weather drives people indoors, said Anita Barkin, co-chair of a COVID-19 task force for the American College Health Association.</p> <p>The association recently recommended that colleges focus on increasing vaccination rates to avoid a new wave of cases.</p> <p>“The message in all of it is, we need to remain vigilant,” Barkin said. “There is certainly pandemic fatigue and people are tired of the pandemic — but it appears that the pandemic is not quite tired of us.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Study: omicron replication, transmissibility
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/15/omicron-found-to-grow-70-times-faster-than-delta-in-bronchial-tissue
GIST	<p>The Omicron Covid variant has been found to multiply about 70 times quicker than the original and Delta versions of coronavirus in tissue samples taken from the bronchus, the main tubes from the windpipe to the lungs, in laboratory experiments that could help explain its rapid transmission.</p> <p>The study, by a team from the University of Hong Kong, also found that the new variant grew 10 times slower in lung tissue, which the authors said could be an indicator of lower disease severity.</p> <p>Michael Chan Chi-wai, who led the work, said the result needed to be interpreted with caution because severe disease is determined not only by how quickly the virus replicates but also by a person’s immune response and, in particular, whether the immune system goes into overdrive, causing a so-called cytokine storm.</p> <p>“It is also noted that by infecting many more people, a very infectious virus may cause more severe disease and death even though the virus itself may be less pathogenic,” he said. “Therefore, taken together with our recent studies showing that the Omicron variant can partially escape immunity from vaccines and past infection, the overall threat from the Omicron variant is likely to be very significant.”</p> <p>Jeremy Kamil, an associate professor of microbiology and immunology at Louisiana State University Health Shreveport, pointed out that Delta, which turned out to be more pathogenic, showed a similar pattern of replicating more slowly in the lungs.</p> <p>“These authors found Omicron replicates fantastically well – even far better than either Delta or the original virus – in bronchial tissue,” Kamil said. “This could in some ways contribute to an advantage in spread/transmission between people.</p> <p>“Of course, a huge component of Omicron’s transmissibility in real life is going to be its potential to escape neutralising antibodies that protect against infection in the first place. It’s very likely spreading well even between vaccinated people, especially those who haven’t recently gotten a booster shot.”</p>

	<p>The initial data, published online and not yet peer-reviewed, came from experiments using lung tissue samples taken from patients during surgery. By 24 hours, the Omicron variant had replicated about 70 times more than Delta and the original variant. Although the bronchus is not the upper respiratory system, scientists said this could lead to people shedding more virus and passing on infections more easily.</p> <p>The findings, together with other recent work showing Omicron infects cells more readily, add to an emerging picture that the variant may be intrinsically more transmissible in addition to evading existing immunity.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 EU: omicron likely accelerate death rate
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/15/omicron-covid-likely-accelerate-death-rate-europe-eu-health-agency
GIST	<p>Christmas get-togethers may need to be downsized as Omicron is now “very likely” to increase the death toll in Europe even if it proves to be less severe, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has said.</p> <p>The new Covid variant’s high transmissibility means that more people are forecast by the EU agency to be admitted to hospital or killed this winter than previously projected.</p> <p>The risk assessment, published on Wednesday, advises governments they urgently need to reintroduce Covid restrictions, with one option being to advise families and friends to avoid mixing over the festive season.</p> <p>Dr Andrea Ammon, director of the ECDC, based in Stockholm, said: “We assess the probability of further spread of the Omicron variant in the EU/European economic area as very high, and it is considered very likely to cause additional hospitalisations and fatalities, further to those already expected from previous forecasts that consider only the Delta variant.</p> <p>“In the current situation, vaccination alone will not allow us to prevent the impact of the Omicron variant, because there will be no time to address the vaccination gaps that still exist.”</p> <p>Beyond ensuring that masks are worn and public spaces and buses and trains remain uncrowded, Ammon said governments “should also consider advising reduced inter-household mixing”. She added: “Exercising additional caution is recommended when travelling and when there is contact between people of different ages during the holiday season”.</p> <p>Anecdotal evidence from South Africa has suggested that Omicron may cause milder disease. But the ECDC’s assessment warns that “even if the severity of disease caused by the Omicron variant of concern is equal or lower than the severity of the Delta variant of concern, the increased transmissibility and resulting exponential growth of cases will rapidly outweigh any benefits of a potentially reduced severity”.</p> <p>The agency’s assessment adds: “Therefore, the Omicron variant of concern is considered likely to cause additional hospitalisations and fatalities, further to those already expected from previous forecasts that consider only the Delta variant of concern.”</p> <p>On Wednesday, South Africa reported a record number of daily Covid infections, with the figure of 26,976 surpassing a peak of 26,485 new cases in early July during a third wave driven by the Delta variant.</p> <p>There is currently a mixed picture on infections across Europe, with some countries experiencing a slump in cases. But governments across the continent have warned their populations of an imminent increase because of the new variant.</p> <p>Denmark and Norway have announced stricter Covid measures because of their soaring infection numbers, while Dutch and Belgian primary schools will close early for Christmas.</p>

	<p>Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, tweeted: “We are facing another Christmas in pandemic mode. But we are more prepared to fight the virus than ever. Over 66% of Europeans have received two shots. And 62 million people already had their boosters, which is the best currently available protection against Omicron.”</p> <p>The ECDC said there was “serious concern” about clusters of cases among the vaccinated but that boosters would “increase protection against severe outcomes from the Delta variant of concern and possibly from Omicron”.</p> <p>Ammon said the onus was now on governments to “ramp up efforts to increase full vaccination in people not yet vaccinated or only partially vaccinated, as well as to administer booster doses to all eligible as soon as possible”.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Google: get vaccinated or face losing job
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/dec/15/google-tells-us-staff-to-get-vaccinated-or-face-losing-job
GIST	<p>Google has told its US staff they must be vaccinated against Covid-19 by the middle of January or face serious repercussions including a pay cut and ultimately the loss of their job.</p> <p>Employees were told they were required to have declared their vaccination status and uploaded proof of it, or to have applied for a medical or religious exemption, by 3 December, according to an internal memo obtained by CNBC, which first reported the story.</p> <p>After that date, Google said, it would start to contact workers who were unvaccinated or had not uploaded proof of vaccination, or whose exemption requests had not been approved.</p> <p>According to the memo, employees who missed a deadline of 18 January to comply with the rules would initially be placed on “paid administrative leave” for 30 days, followed by six months of “unpaid personal leave”. In the final step, Google would terminate the person’s employment.</p> <p>Google is one of several large US employers to have adopted a “no jab, no job” policy for their workforce, although it appears to have gone a step further than some other firms. Google declined a request to comment.</p> <p>It had already informed its US workforce that they would need to be vaccinated to return to its corporate buildings. The chief executive, Sundar Pichai, told staff in a memo in July that the policy would initially be implemented in the US before being adopted globally. Vaccination has also been made a requirement by other US tech companies including Uber and Facebook.</p> <p>Large American corporates have shown themselves to be much more likely to embrace a mandatory vaccination policy than their British counterparts. The US government has ordered companies with more than 100 staff to ensure their workforce is fully vaccinated or regularly tested for Covid by 18 January.</p> <p>US financial firms were among the most enthusiastic about bringing workers back to the office and also among the first to tell their teams during the summer that only fully vaccinated staff could return to their headquarters.</p> <p>On Tuesday the Wall Street bank JPMorgan informed its unvaccinated staff based at its Manhattan offices that they were required to work from home, amid concerns over the spread of the Omicron variant. It had previously allowed unvaccinated staff to work from its New York building provided they were tested twice a week, according to Reuters, which first reported the decision.</p>

	In a memo, the bank called on unvaccinated staff to take up the offer of a jab, and asked eligible employees to get a booster vaccination.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 LAPD tracked BLM, defund the police online
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/15/revealed-los-angeles-police-social-media-surveillance-technology
GIST	<p>The Los Angeles police department worked with a Polish firm that specializes in “strategic communications” to monitor social media and collect millions of tweets last year, including thousands related to Black Lives Matter and “defund the police”, according to records reviewed by the Guardian.</p> <p>Internal LAPD documents, obtained by the Brennan Center for Justice through public records requests, reveal that the department conducted a one-month trial of social media monitoring software from Edge NPD, a company that typically worked in advertising and marketing, had no prior experience contracting with law enforcement and was based thousands of miles away in Warsaw, Poland.</p> <p>During the trial in fall 2020, Edge NPD tracked tweets on roughly 200 keywords for LAPD, the records show. In the process, the software collected millions of tweets, according to Edge NPD’s CEO, Dobromir Cias. The data set included tens of thousands of tweets related to Black Lives Matter and racial justice protests, some of them from prominent Black activists outside LA and private civilians advocating for reforms, the files show.</p> <p>The records suggest that LAPD was interested in using the company’s services in part to help the department respond to “negative narratives”. Cias told the Guardian the company also aimed to flag possible threats.</p> <p>The documents did not reveal what LAPD did with the data that was collected, and the department did not respond to repeated requests for comment.</p> <p>LAPD ultimately did not pursue a permanent contract with the firm. But still, experts said, the trial raised serious concerns.</p> <p>They wondered about the effectiveness of pulling in so much data, in so little time. Some said that, although law enforcement, journalists and researchers regularly monitor public online activity, it was troubling that a police agency’s social media monitoring activities appeared to include tracking a broad swath of critics. And the partnership also raised questions about oversight of surveillance technology, as well as police agencies’ data collection practices.</p> <p>LAPD’s test run with Edge NPD came as law enforcement agencies have increasingly been forced to take their investigations online, and have sought tools to do so. Tech firms have responded by pushing new innovations and pursuing police contracts, and LAPD and the New York police department, with some of the largest budgets in the US, have often been at the forefront of piloting software.</p> <p>Identifying ‘negative narratives’</p> <p>Edge NPD primarily assists private companies with market research and helps them ensure that advertising campaigns aren’t jeopardized by bots and trolls, Cias told the Guardian.</p> <p>The company was connected to LAPD by a US government agency that had used the firm’s software. A representative of that federal department emailed Edge NPD in September 2020, saying LAPD was interested in using its services for “public safety and strategic communications” and to “identify disruptive social media activity being artificially amplified by malign actors”.</p> <p>ABTShield, Edge NPD’s proprietary software, could help LAPD “identify as early as possible when activity that could lead to civil unrest is being amplified via social media”, the US representative wrote,</p>

adding, “From a messaging perspective, knowing what the negative narratives being artificially amplified are would allow the communications team to create effective and timely responses.”

During the 40-day trial in October and November of 2020, Edge NPD provided LAPD with a dashboard monitoring tweets related to six topics: “civil unrest”, “American policing”, “domestic extremism and white nationalism”, “election security”, “potential danger” and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (which at the time was [prompting local LA protests](#)).

The two entities discussed roughly 200 possible [keywords](#) to follow, including “lapdchiefmoore”, “abolish the police”, “nojusticenopeace”, “police budget”, “police killing” and “acab” (a protest slogan that stands for “all cops are bastards”). In one email, Cias suggested adding “defund the police” and “BLM” to the list of keywords to follow.

An LAPD official agreed that BLM would be good to monitor, but added that “there are MANY legitimate people who are using that to express their rights”, records show.

Cias said that in addition to the dashboard, on occasion he would also personally send tweets to LAPD that he thought might signal a public safety threat.

“The major goal was to actually pass [along] quickly anything that looks kind of dangerous,” he said. He acknowledged he didn’t always confirm whether the content he was forwarding was legitimate: “When you’re passing this information, you don’t really know how serious it is. I think it’s up to law enforcement to really verify if it’s true ... We don’t do fact checking.”

At one point, the records show, Cias emailed the department a [post](#) from a critic who had tweeted a video that appeared to show an LAPD officer tackling a journalist with a comment the department was “overfunded ... and high on power”. (Cias told the Guardian he was sharing it as an example of how “defund” narratives were gaining traction online.)

The Brennan Center, which analyzed the tweets, found that the service collected nearly 2m tweets during the trial, including roughly 270,000 posts under the “American policing” category.

The records show the software frequently captured tweets with mainstream news articles and private civilians expressing opinions. The system also flagged tweets from LAPD critics calling on the chief to “resign”, as well as celebrity posts, including a [tweet](#) from Common, the rapper and activist, about racism in America.

‘It creates a haystack’

Experts consulted by the Guardian raised questions about the trial’s set-up, doubting the effectiveness of collecting such large amounts of data.

Mary Pat Dwyer, a Brennan Center fellow, questioned why LAPD was wasting limited resources to “chase content online that doesn’t pose any kind of safety threat”, including ordinary political speech and criticisms of police. “It’s striking the volume of information that they were pulling in and the terms they were using. It’s hard to understand how LAPD would even be processing all of this.”

“It creates a much larger haystack of data that doesn’t actually lead to any real, tangible, positive outcome for communities,” said Steven Renderos, executive director of the national racial justice organization Media Justice. “Instead it just equips the police department with more data that helps it kind of justify its own efforts to to tell a better story about itself.”

He pointed out that the list included keywords such as “domestic extremism” and “racist” that were purportedly intended to capture tweets about white supremacy. “No one is describing themselves as a domestic extremist,” Renderos said. “Instead you then start filtering in tweets and messages from people who are merely ... protesting white supremacy. Take these keywords together and what it’s actually doing is capturing a subset of thought and dissent among people. And that’s dangerous.”

They also worried what an agency like LAPD could ultimately do with such data. “I don’t trust the Los Angeles police department to use a tool with this amount of data in a way that’s responsible, because history has shown us that they can’t,” said Renderos.

LAPD has [faced several](#) racial [profiling scandals](#) over the years. The Guardian also recently [revealed](#) that LAPD was engaging in [broad collection](#) of civilians’ social media data, and had partnered with a different tech firm that claimed its algorithms could [identify people who may commit crimes](#) in the future, with criteria that experts said was discriminatory. Those revelations prompted Facebook to [demand](#) that LAPD stop collecting data on its platform for surveillance.

Activists caught up in the surveillance said they were not surprised. The software flagged tweets by Bree Newsome Bass, who received [national attention](#) in 2015 when she climbed a flagpole to remove a confederate flag at the South Carolina statehouse. In a [thread](#) included in the files, Newsome Bass advocated for demilitarizing police and putting funding toward mental health first responders. “The resistance to defunding police is 100% about racism & normalizing the daily violence police forces inflict on marginalized communities for the benefit of ruling classes,” she wrote.

“It’s political targeting,” Newsome Bass told the Guardian. “We’ve seen instance after instance where police agencies are focused more on policing Black people who are demanding equality and civil rights than actually preventing any violence ... They’re making the case for defunding the police even further. They’re using taxpayer dollars to monitor our social media where we’re talking about how we’re wasting money on police.”

“There’s nothing violent or criminal about saying ‘defund the police’,” added Melina Abdullah, co-founder of Black Lives Matter LA. “We have a right to say ‘defund the police’. The idea that LA is tracking this kind of ideology should be very scary to people.”

Combatting ‘defund the police’

Cias told the Guardian the trial was free for LAPD and meant to be a “demonstration” of its technology, and to “help LAPD detect potentially dangerous situations” during the tense election period. He said the service identified roughly a dozen alerts related to possible threats and provided examples of tweets about protest clashes and about Dodgers fans allegedly engaging in vandalism while celebrating.

He stressed his firm is not a defense contractor, and the service was not intended to monitor specific activists: “This was not for actually analyzing the members of the [Black Lives Matter movement](#).”

In a [thank you letter](#) to the company after the trial, an LAPD official said ABTShield had surfaced “threat-related content” and “enabled us to more efficiently analyze this barrage of data”. The service helps “parse out the proverbial ‘signal from the noise’”, the official said. In another email, an LAPD representative wrote, “The product is definitely working.”

As Edge NPD was starting its trial, the [company also proposed](#) a \$150,000 annual contract for LAPD. The company told LAPD it could use artificial intelligence, machine learning and “human analysis” to identify online narratives that were rooted in “disinformation”, as well as public safety threats.

The firm proposed LAPD monitor specific “client-identified” topics, including “LA riots”, “police violence”, “BLM protests” and the “Proud Boys”. It also suggested that LAPD was the direct subject of misinformation and “malicious activity”, writing: “The LAPD itself is being targeted by organized attacks of automated bots and trolls (e.g. police brutality misinformation and “defund the police” narratives).”

Asked for clarification, Cias told the Guardian he did not have specific evidence of bot attacks on LAPD or of trolls spreading “defund the police” misinformation, but that the discussion was based on a “very strong hypothesis”.

“I could qualitatively assume that it might be true that those narratives related with Black Lives Matter and defunding police might be also supported ... to some extent by malign actors who are interested in actually disorganizing public institutions in the United States,” he said, adding that he was proposing, in effect, doing “market research”.

While there is [evidence](#) that Russian trolls amplified Black Lives Matter content during the 2016 US election, activists said they were concerned that police departments and other critics of their movement were conflating authentic organizing online and troll campaigns.

“There’s been a lot of grassroots organizing to get people involved in the budget process and to put a spotlight on the absurd amount of money we spend on policing,” said Kenneth Mejia, an LA housing justice activist and city comptroller candidate who advocated for defunding. He noted that last year, BLMLA facilitated a community-driven [process](#) to present a proposed “people’s budget” that cut LAPD funding. “There’s an organic and growing awareness of the reallocating of resources from the police.”

LAPD did not move forward with a formal contract with Edge, though has remained interested in this kind of service, with records showing the department bought or pursued software from at least 10 companies that monitor social media.

Last week, Twitter said it had suspended ABTShield’s developer account based on evidence that the firm violated its policies by deviating from approved uses, though the company did not elaborate further on the decision. Twitter’s policies allow for public data to be used for “news alerting” and “first responder support”, but it [prohibits](#) surveillance of “sensitive groups”, such as activist organizations.

A Twitter spokesperson, Shaokyi Amdo, said in a statement: “Twitter prohibits the use of our developer services for surveillance purposes. Period. We proactively enforce our policies to ensure customers are in compliance and will continue to do so.”

Evan Greer, deputy director of Fight for the Future, a digital rights group, said there should be stronger restrictions against the broad collection of social media data and the analysis law enforcement may perform on it.

“People don’t fully grasp the ways in which the ability to analyze data at a mass scale changes the game. There’s a difference between you tweeting something and knowing that it may be seen in public, and you tweeting something and knowing that it can be vacuumed up and analyzed in a million different ways using artificial intelligence and machine learning.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Afghan women face old family pressures
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-taliban-return-afghan-women-face-old-p pressures-from-fathers-brothers-11639564204?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>KABUL—When Marjan Amiri marched for women’s rights on the streets of Kabul in September, Taliban gunmen called her a prostitute, kicked her and threatened to shoot her in the head. But what scared the 24-year-old Afghan civil servant most was her father’s reaction when she returned home.</p> <p>Furious that she defied his orders against attending the protest, he repeatedly hit her “like a ball on the ground,” she said. Ms. Amiri’s younger sister, who witnessed the violence, confirmed her account. Her father couldn’t be reached for comment.</p> <p>“Nothing scares me more than my father. Not even the Taliban,” said Ms. Amiri, who worked at the ministry of interior and like almost all Afghan female government employees lost her job after the Taliban takeover on Aug. 15. “I am standing against the Taliban because of what I went through with my father,” she said.</p>

Even in Afghanistan's patriarchal society, women used to be able to carve a path to independence for themselves, at least in relatively more liberal cities such as Kabul. Despite her family's opposition, Ms. Amiri earned a university degree, found a job and aspired to become a diplomat.

Now those aspirations are gone.

The Taliban, who follow the ultraconservative rural traditions of Afghanistan's Pashtun belt, have gone beyond what Islamic scholars elsewhere in the world consider to be appropriate, including restricting women's education and work. While Afghan men in cities such as Kabul generally consider those views too extreme, many do believe that women are better off at home. Emboldened by the Taliban comeback, these men are telling their daughters, sisters and wives to adapt their lifestyles to the new regime and let go of the liberties they enjoyed until August.

As a result, young urban women such as Ms. Amiri find themselves largely confined to their homes. The United Nations' women's agency said this month that the reversals of women's freedom had been immediate and dramatic. "Families are also self-censoring and imposing restrictions on the mobility of women and girls as a protection measure," the agency said, pointing to how the fear of the Taliban transcends specific prohibitions on what women can and can't do.

Empowering women was a key objective during the 20 years of American-led [international involvement in Afghanistan](#). The change was especially visible in places such as Kabul, where women pursued careers in sectors from politics to journalism to law, and were often their family's breadwinners.

Since August, women have been barred from many workplaces. Schools for girls over sixth grade are shut in most of the country. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has been disbanded, as have shelters for victims of domestic violence. Fearing harassment by Taliban fighters—who often demand women to be accompanied by a male guardian—many women are too scared to go outside.

Afghan women say other men on the streets have become more aggressive as well, scolding them for their choice of clothes.

Hila, 25, is one of the few Afghan women still employed, working at one of the foreign embassies that remained in Kabul after the Taliban takeover. She says she has financially supported her parents and younger siblings for years. Even so, her younger brother, who is unemployed, welcomed the Taliban's policy on women.

"He says: 'What the Taliban say is good for women. It is good for girls because it's based on Islamic rules and we should obey that.' But I don't think these are Islamic rules," Hila said. "The men who are like my brother, they are happy that the Taliban are back. They think the power is now in their hands."

Hila considers herself lucky: She says her cousin, a law graduate, was pressured by her in-laws to quit her job as a third-grade teacher when the Taliban took over Kabul. But she is worried that if she loses her job she will have to get married to a man of her parents' choice. "Girls who have their own salaries can protect themselves," she said.

In a society where many believe women have no place in public life, women's rights were often fragile. Most women who served in the Afghan armed forces, for instance, tried to keep their profession secret from family and friends.

Fahima, a 24-year-old Afghan Air Force officer, said that her best friend stopped seeing her when she found out she was in the military. When her brother-in-law found out, he threatened to kill her.

She and other female officers say they were never truly accepted by their male colleagues. When the Taliban arrived on Kabul's doorstep, these colleagues turned even more hostile.

Fahima was still at the Air Force headquarters on the morning of Aug. 15, the day of the Taliban takeover, when her male colleagues started mocking her: “From now on you have to either wear a burqa or sit at home,” she recalls them saying.

Now living in hiding after selling many of her possessions for food, Fahima worries she could be hunted down by the Taliban, who have killed some former members of the armed forces despite promises of an amnesty.

Nargis Nehan, who served as a cabinet minister and as an adviser to ousted President Ashraf Ghani, said the U.S. used the issue of women’s rights to persuade other countries to join them in Afghanistan. “The moment they decided to leave Afghanistan, women were left behind. If helping women was a real objective they would not have given up so easily.”

The U.S. and its Western allies say they are committed to supporting Afghan women, and consider the Taliban’s respect of women’s rights as a precondition to recognizing their government as legitimate.

Taliban officials say that they will allow older girls to go to school and women to return to their workplaces once free transportation and gender-segregation arrangements are made. On Dec. 3, the movement’s supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, issued a decree that banned forced marriages and outlined widows’ rights regarding children and inheritance. The decree said nothing about women’s right to study and work.

Mufti Mohammad Hassan, a senior Islamic legal scholar who has been advising the Taliban leadership on women’s rights, said the Taliban government is “deadly serious” about women’s rights.

“When it comes to education, under Shariah law rulers are compelled to provide opportunities for women to study in all fields, from engineering to medicine to journalism to aviation,” he said. “We are working on this issue and will continue to do so.”

Many Afghans are skeptical of the Taliban’s assurances. Until a few months ago, Ms. Amiri, the 24-year-old protester, believed that by working hard she could escape the homebound life that many Afghan women resign themselves to. She was financially independent of her family and her life goal—to become a diplomat—seemed within reach.

The Taliban takeover changed everything.

“I had earned my own money so that I could fulfill my dreams. With their arrival, my dreams shattered,” said Ms. Amiri. Her parents told her she would soon get used to sitting at home, but she didn’t.

With nothing to lose, she joined a burgeoning group of women’s-rights protesters who gathered in small groups on the streets of Kabul. Like other female protesters, she has come to expect threats and violence, and not only from the Taliban or her father.

An older brother who lives in France threatened to come to Afghanistan to punish her if she participated in one more protest, she said. Her uncles were furious. Even her 11-year-old brother said he was ashamed of her. She was temporarily kicked out of her house.

But she says she won’t give up easily.

“We need to fight for our rights,” she said. “I’m ready to die for them.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Navy grapples w/jet fuel leak in Hawaii
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/navy-grapples-with-jet-fuel-leak-in-hawaii-that-sickened-local-residents-11639605974?mod=hp_listb_pos2

HONOLULU—The leak of jet fuel from a World War II-era storage facility into a local aquifer has displaced more than 3,000 military service members and their families, sickened residents and put renewed pressure on the military to invest millions to stop future leaks.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks visited the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility on Tuesday after petroleum leaked into the aquifer that provides fresh water to military families and tens of thousands of Hawaiians. Ms. Hicks toured the tunnels inside the Navy facility, completed in 1943, which contains tanks holding up to 250 million gallons of jet fuel for military operations in the Pacific.

The Navy has said it found the source of the latest leak, but environmental activists and local officials are demanding the Navy do more.

“At DoD, we recognize the need to continue to care for all affected personnel and their families and help them return to their homes in a safe and expeditious manner,” Ms. Hicks said in a statement late Tuesday. “We also recognize we need to double down on our efforts to earn the trust and confidence of the people of Hawaii in our ability to manage this situation.”

Ms. Hicks was the most senior military official to tour the facility since residents first detected the problem last month. She met with families displaced to hotels and elsewhere and talked to local leaders and health officials. Her trip to Hawaii to visit the Indo-Pacific Command, which oversees military operations in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, was pre-scheduled, but the water crisis consumed more than half of her visit, officials said.

A Navy investigation is under way, and Hawaii’s congressional delegation has asked the Pentagon inspector general to investigate the leak.

Residents furious that their families were exposed to poisoned water have lambasted Navy officials who visited earlier.

“I’m here to ask why you weren’t a wingman to protect my 13-month-old son when I was bathing him, when I was giving him a sippy cup full of water from my faucet, when he has been throwing up for days on end,” [one woman asked](#) at a meeting attended by Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro last week.

The woman said she and her husband had suffered sore throats, stomach pain, headache, vomiting, diarrhea and other symptoms, and had visited the emergency room for treatment.

The water contamination was first disclosed last month, when the Navy announced it was investigating the Nov. 20 discovery of [14,000 gallons of fuel-water mix in a drain pipe](#) near Red Hill. Around the same time, residents complained of a fuel odor from their water.

In May, an operator error [caused 1,618 gallons of jet fuel to leak](#) from a pipeline at Red Hill. The Navy is examining whether the two incidents are related.

[According to the Hawaii Department of Health](#), water samples collected Dec. 5 at the Red Hill plant contained 350 times more gas and diesel hydrocarbons than found in safe drinking water. The department also disputed the Navy’s claim that the problem had been contained to Red Hill and said it found trace amounts of petroleum in samples taken from the Aliamanu Child Development Center, located on base, and private residences attached to the Navy’s water system.

Two days later, the department ordered the Navy to suspend operations at the facility, remove the fuel and submit a corrective plan within 30 days.

Earlier this week, residents living near the military protested outside the base.

Environmental activists have called for the military to close the facility, while some local and state officials have called for draining the facility. Both proposed solutions would cost the Navy millions. And

the latest defense budget proposal calls for a \$280 million budget cut to one of the main Navy commands that would be charged with tackling the problem at Red Hill.

Red Hill has been the site of previous leaks and safety issues, according to the Navy. In October, [Hawaii's Department of Health fined the Navy](#) \$325,182 for violations it discovered the previous year. In 2014, the Navy reported that an operator error led to the leak of 27,000 gallons of jet fuel that seeped into the groundwater.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Retail sales slow: inflation, shortages
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-economy-november-2021-retail-sales-11639498894?mod=hp_major_pos1#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>Retail sales rose modestly at the start of the holiday season, as shoppers faced rising inflation and supply shortages, and some snapped up gifts earlier.</p> <p>Sales at U.S. retail stores, online sellers, and restaurants rose by a seasonally-adjusted 0.3% in November from the previous month, the Commerce Department said Wednesday. That was smaller than last month's increase in consumer prices, and a slowdown from October's robust 1.8% sales increase.</p> <p>Broadly consumer demand is strong, and well above last year's levels. Retail sales rose 18.2% in November from a year earlier, showing low unemployment, rising wages and savings from stimulus payments are giving Americans the capacity to spend more this year. That gain well outpaced the 6.8% increase in consumer prices in November from a year earlier, according to the Labor Department.</p> <p>But there are barriers to consumers' ability to continue spending at a faster pace than prices are rising. Inflation is at a 39-year high, increased costs for essentials, such as energy and transportation could limit spending on gifts, electronics and accessories, and supply chain and labor issues causing shortages of goods and depleted capacity in the service industry.</p> <p>Another factor is that holiday shoppers appeared to have started early this year. October's gain in retail sales was the largest since March.</p> <p>"If you look at the weakness in November sales, it looks more related to holiday shopping," said Aditya Bhawe, an economist for Bank of America. "Some of that is going to be a reflection of prices, but the bigger story here is the change in the seasonal pattern," with consumers shopping earlier for holiday gifts than in usual years.</p> <p>Wednesday's report showed sales at electronics stores down 4.6% in November from the previous month, while sales at general merchandise stores were down 1.2%. Spending at nonstore retailers, including online sellers, was flat last month.</p> <p>Stores that sell sporting goods, musical instruments and books saw sales increase by 1.3% in November, the same as the increase at food and beverage stores. Sales at gas stations were up 1.7% last month and are up 52% from a year earlier, in part reflecting higher prices at the pump.</p> <p>Higher spending on groceries and gasoline could be limiting sales elsewhere. Inflation can be a "double-whammy" for lower-income consumers, who tend to spend a larger percentage of their incomes than higher-income households and tend to spend more on categories with the most price volatility, like food and energy, Mr. Bhawe said.</p> <p>Since retail sales figures aren't adjusted for inflation, higher prices contribute to some of the growth. But other factors, like a persistent savings glut for many consumers since the worst of the pandemic, are also fueling growth. That can contribute to a continued cycle of rising prices, given that companies feel confident that customers will be willing to pay them.</p>

“We’re not seeing that resistance,” said Bruce Thorn, chief executive of Big Lots Inc., the discount retailer, on an earnings call earlier this month. “We’re expecting to be able to continue to pass along these price increases.”

Danielle David, owner of Danielle’s Consignment Boutique in Rochester, Minn., said 2021 will be the best year in the 14 years she has been in business. She has already passed \$350,000 in sales this year, after recording annual revenue of around \$240,000 in 2019 and 2020, due to robust sales of secondhand luxury goods from brands like [Lululemon](#), Michael Kors and Gucci.

“People want to save money, but they also want to shop a lot more, so here they can get a \$50-\$100 shirt for \$12,” she said. It helped that so many people spent their free time during pandemic shutdowns tidying up their homes and mounting a war on clutter.

Ms. David already sees opportunities around the corner: With prom dresses expected to be in short supply next spring, she has stocked up on more vintage offerings to get ready. “I’ve been telling people to come on down and get ’em while I’ve got ’em,” she said.

The backlogs that have kept ocean liners anchored offshore for weeks at a time due to pandemic disruptions aren’t abating quickly, despite a raft of [new federal policies](#) and changes to procedures at major seaports. Though major retailers, like [Walmart](#) Inc. and [Amazon.com](#) Inc., have managed to keep shelves stocked and deliveries flowing, [stores run the risk](#) of getting stuck with excess or outdated inventory if goods arrive too late for holiday shopping.

Industries where inflation is hitting hardest may start to see consumers pull back from certain purchases because of price increases.

Jill Grobowsky Bergus, co-owner of three Lockhart Smokehouse barbecue restaurants in the Dallas area, said that they have had to raise prices by 20% to 30% in recent months and have held back from further increases because they worry customers will blanch.

“We’re talking to our meat supplier like we’re day traders,” Ms. Grobowsky Bergus said. Beef prices are up 21% over the past year while pork is up 17%, according to government data. Spending at restaurants was up 1% in November over the previous month.

Shortages of materials and labor have also caused problems. Lockhart Smokehouse has raised pay to keep their employees and has had to contend with suppliers who don’t have enough delivery drivers. Even the 2-ounce plastic cups for barbecue sauce have been in short supply.

Still, sales were strong in November, she said, and have improved since the worst of the Delta variant wave this summer.

The growth for restaurant sales bodes well for a rebalancing of the economy between spending on goods and services, which has been heavily skewed toward good during the pandemic, economists said.

“Some slowing at the margin at restaurants and other high-contact services seems likely in December and forward due to Omicron, but the experience of the Delta wave suggests that the ebbs due to the pandemic tend to be brief and quickly reversed,” said Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpont.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Fireworks NYE Space Needle but no crowds
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3284005/fireworks-return-new-years-eve-space-needle-2021/
GIST	Live fireworks will return to the Space Needle in Seattle to ring in 2022, but there will be additional special effects that can only be seen on TV or streaming online.

Return to Top	<p>The Space Needle partnered with multimedia studios and digital artists to create the “first-ever live fireworks show to be augmented and broadcast live with exclusive special effects that can only be seen on TV or streaming online.”</p> <p>People are encouraged to “stream in the new year” from home. While there will be fireworks, there will be no events and no public viewing at Seattle Center as crowds will not be permitted “in support of public health guidance.”</p> <p>If you remember last year — though it certainly feels like more than a year has passed — the New Year’s Eve celebration to ring in 2021 was entirely virtual. The famous Seattle landmark was lit in T-Mobile’s signature magenta color but there were no fireworks. Further back, at the end of 2019, the New Year’s Eve show ended before it really begun after strong winds forced the cancellation of the fireworks.</p> <p>This year, to see the on-screen exclusive special effects for T-Mobile New Year’s at the Needle in 2021, tune in to KING 5 on your TV, stream it online at king5.com, or through the KING 5 mobile app.</p>
-------------------------------	--

HEADLINE	12/15 Gov. proposes \$800M for homelessness
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3283869/inslee-proposes-homelessness-solutions/
GIST	<p>Gov. Jay Inslee has proposed investing more than \$800 million to find solutions for individuals living without shelter in Washington, and to help those at risk of becoming homeless.</p> <p>This was part of a proposal outlined by the governor on Wednesday to help combat the state’s homelessness crisis.</p> <p>Gov. Inslee says no one in Washington should be spending the night in the cold under a bridge, and this money will help ensure that doesn’t happen anymore.</p> <p>“We have moral imperative to move forward,” he said. “Lives are at stake.”</p> <p>“Unsheltered Washingtonians deserve a safe, warm and dry place to live, with additional resources available, if they need them,” Inslee added in a written statement. “This is not only the right thing to do for these people, but the right thing to do for our state and our communities.”</p> <p>The investment would build more affordable housing, as well as supportive housing with services such as substance abuse treatment. It would also provide help with rent and utilities for people who are in danger of becoming homeless.</p> <p>As part of the supplemental budget proposal, the state would add an estimated 2,600 permanent supportive housing units. Gov. Inslee also proposes that the state address “key gaps in facilities and services” to: pursue new avenues to help families and individuals remain in their homes; secure more facilities to provide tiny homes, enhanced shelters, permanent supportive housing, and permanent affordable housing; expand supportive services for people with behavioral health needs; transition people encamped on the public right of way to permanent housing solutions; and restore the range of affordable housing types in our cities.</p> <p>“We’ve proposed a lot, but a lot is required to deal with this problem,” Inslee said during the press conference.</p> <p>Overall, the governor proposes investing about \$815 million to implement this plan. According to the policy brief, more than two-thirds of this investment will be covered by federal relief funding.</p> <p>Earlier this week, Gov. Inslee announced his 2022 climate proposals, followed by his salmon recovery policy proposals.</p>

HEADLINE	12/15 Britain's dire estimate daily omicron cases
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/world/europe/uk-omicron-surge.html
GIST	<p>It was a stunning number. On Monday, Britain's health secretary, Sajid Javid, told a televised session of Parliament that approximately 200,000 people nationwide were catching the Omicron variant of the coronavirus that day.</p> <p>The figure was nearly four times the number of new coronavirus cases officially reported for the day, and it made front-page news across the country. Prime Minister Boris Johnson made it part of his rationale for imposing new social restrictions and vaccine requirements.</p> <p>The coronavirus is clearly spreading explosively in Britain now, and the country reported more than 78,000 new cases on Wednesday, the highest single-day tally since the pandemic began. And the government confirmed that as of Wednesday, at least 10,017 people in the country had contracted the Omicron variant to date. Only a sampling of positive tests are checked to see which variant is involved, so the true total for Omicron is certainly much higher.</p> <p>But the dire figure offered by Mr. Javid did not come from tallying test results. It was an estimate generated by a mathematical model reflecting current social behavior and a pattern of Omicron cases doubling roughly every two days. It raised alarm not just in pandemic-weary Britain, but also in many other nations that are watching closely for signs of how quickly the new variant can spread through a heavily vaccinated population.</p> <p>Britain is a good place to look for clues. It has been a leader in Covid-19 vaccinations and in the genomic sequencing needed to detect and track variants. One reason that Britain has confirmed so many Omicron cases, compared with the 2,629 reported so far in the entire European Union, is that British scientists are determinedly looking for it. (So far, only one person in Britain is known to have died after contracting the variant, which was first identified in Africa in late November.)</p> <p>Another reason for Britain's high Omicron count may be that British pandemic restrictions have tended to be far less focused than those of its European peers. After Mr. Johnson dropped nearly all social restrictions last summer, many people eagerly resumed social gatherings and ceased wearing masks in crowded places.</p> <p>Now, with some scientists forecasting a surge of hospitalizations worse than the one last winter, critics of the government wondered whether having Mr. Javid reveal the dire estimate on Monday was an attempt to goad people into taking warnings more seriously and to speed up vaccinations.</p> <p>"This is a back-of-the-envelope calculation," said Simon R. Clarke, an associate professor of cellular microbiology at the University of Reading. "This is about how quickly it can expand in the short term," he added. "Obviously, it can't go on forever."</p> <p>The government's math was partially laid out in a technical briefing on Friday. Researchers know that the true number of coronavirus infections in the population far exceeds the number of reported cases, because not everyone who is infected gets sick, and many who feel symptoms do not get tested.</p> <p>Only a small proportion of positive tests are sent for genetic sequencing, the surest way to confirm which variant caused an infection. But researchers know that P.C.R. tests are able to detect a deletion in one gene of the virus that is a fairly reliable signal of Omicron's presence. That flagged 705 likely Omicron cases in the week that ended Nov. 30.</p> <p>Using those figures, researchers estimated that 1,219 Britons caught the Omicron variant on Nov. 30 and that the figure was doubling every 2.5 days. At that rate, the briefing paper said, more than a million people a day would be getting infected with it by Christmas, though the buildup of immunity and changes in people's behavior would probably slow the trend before then.</p>

	<p>The figure cited by Mr. Javid on Monday appeared to be based on an even shorter doubling time of about 1.9 days, two outside experts said — an indication that the government’s projections were rapidly growing more pessimistic. The health agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>Analysts said that the government, which has been widely criticized for communication failures during the pandemic, had failed to explain to the public how it had arrived at its estimate.</p> <p>“My main problem is the way these numbers have been communicated, not necessarily with the numbers themselves,” said David Spiegelhalter, a statistician at the University of Cambridge. “The crucial thing is that there is a huge amount of this variant around, it’s going to get far worse, and millions of people are going to get it. That is a reasonable message to set out. But the accuracy of the numbers is another matter.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Apple’s new return to office date: TBD
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines?name=style-coronavirus&region=hub&block=storyline_live_updates_block_recirc&action=click&pgtype=LegacyCollection#apple-return-to-work
GIST	<p>Apple, which had already delayed its employees’ return to physical offices from September to October to January to February, has a new timeline: to be determined.</p> <p>Tim Cook, Apple’s chief executive, told employees in a message viewed by The New York Times on Wednesday that the company was delaying a return to hybrid work “to a date yet to be determined.”</p> <p>He said the decision was made because of the surge of the coronavirus around the world, fueled by the contagious Omicron variant. Mr. Cook also said the company would provide an additional \$1,000 to each employee to help furnish home offices.</p> <p>The company confirmed the postponement but declined to comment further.</p> <p>The news came on the heels of Apple’s temporarily closing three retail stores, in Miami, Annapolis, Md., and Ottawa, amid a spike of positive tests and exposure among employees at those stores.</p> <p>Unlike other big tech companies like Facebook, which has allowed employees to request to work from home permanently, Apple has maintained that it wants its workers to return to the office at least part-time when it is safe to do so. That has led to conflict with some of its workers, who fought this plan over the summer, a clash that evolved into AppleToo, a broader activist movement at the company.</p> <p>With its new indefinite timeline, Apple joins a growing list of companies that have bowed to the unpredictable ebbs and flows of the pandemic by scrapping specific return dates.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Airlines suggest mask mandate not needed
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/15/airline-chiefs-suggest-masks-planes-not-needed-cov/
GIST	<p>The chiefs of United Airlines and American Airlines told lawmakers Wednesday that the federal mask mandate doesn’t give passengers much extra protection from COVID-19 on flights, while the head of a flight attendants union called for a crackdown on airport alcohol sales to curb a spate of unruly travelers who often object to wearing masks.</p> <p>During a Senate hearing to review the federal government’s \$54 billion bailout of airlines during the pandemic, Republican Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi asked airline executives whether passengers will ever be able to fly again without masks.</p>

The CEOs of United and American suggested the mandate isn't needed even now, citing the high-quality air filtration systems on most planes.

"I think the case is very strong that masks don't add much in the air cabin environment," said United CEO Scott Kirby.

American CEO Doug Parker replied, "I concur. The aircraft is the safest place you can be."

Delta Air Lines CEO John Laughter told lawmakers that the air quality on a passenger plane is "superior to many indoor spaces that you can be."

Mr. Kirby said cabin air is filtered 20 to 30 times per hour and is "far safer than a theater."

Their answers drew an outraged response from Sen. Edward Markey, Massachusetts Democrat.

"I'm shocked that some of the CEOs here today have suggested that we no longer need mask mandates on planes," Mr. Markey said. "There are tens of thousands of people flying who are unvaccinated today on planes in the United States. And it's unfair to people who are vaccinated to have them sitting next to them with their mask off. It would be wrong, it would be immoral to ever take that position. People are petrified."

Since the pandemic began, federal law has required travelers to wear masks at all times in airports and aboard planes. Airline workers say the mandate is often the flashpoint in a rising number of assaults and other disruptions by passengers on flights.

But Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants, said the decision to lift the mask mandate is "probably for the medical community to decide." She said the quality of air filtration systems on planes varies with the age of the aircraft and that masks are part of a "layered" protection system.

"We absolutely look forward to the day that we no longer have the mask requirement," Ms. Nelson said. "We are simply trying to get through this pandemic and have had to enforce this to keep everyone safe."

She said a more urgent need is for airports to stop the sale of "to go" alcohol before passengers board planes. Alcohol is the cause of about 60% of disruptive passengers during the pandemic, she told lawmakers.

"We do need more enforcement in the airports," Ms. Nelson said. "We need to ban 'to-go' alcohol. This is a major issue. They are pushing it now in the airports, and that is unacceptable. We would hope that would stop."

The Federal Aviation Administration has cited a "disturbing increase" in the number of unruly passengers as airlines return to fuller flights from pandemic restrictions. The FAA has received more unruly-passenger reports this year than it did in the entire previous decade, and it has imposed a zero-tolerance policy for interfering with or assaulting flight attendants.

Passenger complaints against airlines also have soared this year over canceled flights and failure to provide refunds. Mr. Markey said airlines owe passengers up to \$20 billion in refunds but said the airlines "refuse to do the right thing."

Mr. Parker said American refunded \$3.2 billion in cash payments in 2020 alone "for every flight that we canceled."

But Mr. Markey said passengers who bail on scheduled flights due to "justifiable concern" about the risk of COVID-19 should receive a refund or a voucher to be used indefinitely.

Mr. Parker said his airline is offering such passengers a credit to be used through March 31, 2022. Mr. Markey said the term should be unlimited.

“The passengers want the money back,” Mr. Markey said. “They want fairness. They shouldn’t have to worry ... that they have to jump on a flight in the next three months when the pandemic is rising.”

Sen. Marsha Blackburn, Tennessee Republican, grilled Mr. Kirby about United’s vaccine mandate for employees and its termination of some workers who declined on religious grounds to get the shots. He said United accepted about 80% of requests for religious exemptions, but said about 200 other workers “chose to leave the company” over the policy.

Ms. Blackburn noted that airlines are complaining about finding enough employees and told him, “seems like you could be able to find a workaround” for the religious objectors.

Despite those concerns, the tenor of the hearing was mostly what Sen. Brian Schatz, Hawaii Democrat, described as “a lovefest.”

Committee Chairwoman Maria Cantwell, Washington Democrat, and Mr. Wicker both praised the airlines’ performances during the pandemic, and they called the federal government’s “payroll support program” a timely step that saved the industry.

The airline chiefs agreed and thanked lawmakers repeatedly for the billions in aid.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is the most disruptive crisis in the history of commercial aviation,” Mr. Kirby said. “The quick response by the federal government ... prevented what would have been an unprecedented shutdown of air service that would have impacted the U.S. and world economy for years to come.”

Of the \$54 billion in taxpayer-funded payroll grants to airlines in three rounds in 2020 and this year, the Treasury Department required larger carriers to repay 30% and to award the government stock agreements. Those stock options are reportedly now worth a tiny fraction of what taxpayers provided in aid.

The airlines also agreed to promissory notes to eventually pay back a total of \$14 billion.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Ukraine military in long odds against Russia
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/15/outmanned-and-outgunned-ukraines-military-faces-lo/
GIST	<p>On paper, it’s an obvious mismatch.</p> <p>The Ukrainian military is vastly outmanned and outgunned by its neighbor and rival Russia. The nearly 100,000 Russian troops now stationed along the nations’ restive border represent less than 10% of the active-duty military personnel Moscow could bring to bear in a full-scale invasion. The Ukrainian military has about 255,000 forces in its own right. Russia’s roughly 4-1 manpower edge would only grow if each nation called up all of its reserves for all-out war.</p> <p>Despite hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. military aid and multiple deliveries of Javelin anti-tank missiles capable of inflicting serious damage on Russian armored columns, Ukraine is still at a massive disadvantage in military weapons, vehicles and hardware. The number of Russian guns, tanks, planes, helicopters and artillery dramatically dwarf those of Ukraine.</p> <p>The figures are no surprise given Russia’s military history and the amount of firepower left over from its historic Cold War-era buildup. Although Russia is no longer the power it was during the Soviet era, it maintains one of the highest military budgets in the world — about \$42 billion annually compared with Ukraine’s \$9.6 billion, according to data compiled by the Global Firepower Index.</p>

Military analysts stress that the tale of the tape doesn't tell the full story when it comes to a potential Russia versus Ukraine clash. No one argues that Russia would win decisively in a vacuum, but the real-world horror of a full-scale land war in the 21st century might play to Ukraine's advantage, as would a soaring level of morale among Ukrainian troops eager to check Moscow's aggression and prevent Russian President Vladimir Putin from seizing more territory through force, as he did with the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

Against that backdrop, Ukraine's ultimate goal wouldn't be to defeat Russia outright in battle, but instead to dish out as much punishment as possible and change the Kremlin's willingness to fight.

While ruling out U.S. troop aid, President Biden has promised the most severe economic sanctions yet against Russia in the event of an invasion. The U.S. could attack the value of the ruble or block Russian banks and companies from the international financial system.

In that respect, specialists argue, Kyiv has a chance and a Russian invasion would be no cakewalk.

"If Putin decides he's going to invade and conquer Ukraine, no, the Ukrainians can't prevent him from doing that," said Frederick Kagan, director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute who closely tracks the region. "The power imbalance — setting aside the fact that [Putin] could nuke them — is so great that of course they couldn't reasonably expect to beat the Russian military in a straight force-on-force conflict."

Still, he said, "Putin isn't going to deploy all of the forces he has to this fight. And when you actually start looking harder at the limitations on the risks Putin is likely to take, then you get to some scenarios where the Ukrainians could potentially be able to change the balance of risk and reward to Putin in a way that makes this look like a very unattractive proposition."

Indeed, both the Trump and Biden administrations have signed off on major deliveries of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine that are designed to do just that: inflict maximum pain on the Russian military, should it mount a full invasion, and force Mr. Putin to decide whether he is willing to let tens of thousands of his people die or permanently cripple his military in a bloody, protracted battle.

Since the Russian president invaded Crimea, American security assistance to Ukraine has exploded. The U.S. has committed more than \$2 billion in security aid to Ukraine over the past seven years, according to Pentagon figures. That money is badly needed. The Ukrainian military has been bogged down with fighting in the disputed Donbas region, the site of regular clashes between Ukrainian forces and a separatist movement with solid backing from Russia.

Power imbalance

Politically, the U.S. has put public pressure on Mr. Putin and warned against an invasion. Mr. Biden and Mr. Putin spoke via video conference last week. White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on Wednesday spoke with his Russian counterpart and "reiterated our strong concerns about the Russian military buildup on the border with Ukraine," the White House said in a statement.

European powers have warned the Kremlin against any offensive moves.

"Any violation of territorial integrity will have its price — a high price — and we will speak with one voice on this together with our European partners and our trans-Atlantic allies," new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Wednesday.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Western nations are boosting their rhetorical and material support for Ukraine in hopes of dissuading any idea of a Russian military operation.

“We are in deter mode,” Mr. Borrell said while chairing a meeting of the EU’s foreign ministers in Brussels this week. “In any case, we will send a clear signal that any aggression against Ukraine will have a high cost for Russia.”

While the U.S. and its NATO allies seemingly have ruled out sending their own ground troops to Ukraine, some critics say Mr. Biden should take a harder line. Rather than rely on discussions with Moscow, they say, the U.S. can and should dramatically increase shipments of military equipment to Ukraine.

“Thankfully, the United States doesn’t have to deploy tens of thousands of troops to Ukraine. We don’t have to fight for the Ukrainians. ... They want American diplomatic support, and they would like American hardware, military equipment, defensive equipment to help them defend themselves,” Luke Coffey, director of the Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said during a virtual event on Russian-Ukrainian tensions this week.

Biden administration officials said they have ramped up security assistance to Ukraine this year.

Still, no amount of financial aid will change the fact that the raw numbers tilt dramatically in Russia’s favor — or that Ukraine looms far larger in the Russian strategic calculus of national interests than it does for the United States.

Russia boasts 4,144 total military aircraft, including 789 fighter aircraft, compared with just 285 and 42, respectively, for Ukraine. Russia’s military has more than 27,000 armored vehicles — more than twice as many as Ukraine, according to Global Firepower Index data. While the Javelin missiles could slow Russia’s advance, the Russian military has roughly 13,000 tanks at its disposal that almost surely would overwhelm Ukraine’s defenses.

Russia also has more than 8,300 pieces of towed artillery and mobile rocket launchers, compared with Ukraine’s 2,590, Global Firepower Index figures show. The potential conflict would take place on land, but the vast difference in sea power also underscores Russia’s advantage: a fleet of more than 600 vessels, compared with 25 for Ukraine.

Much of Ukraine’s equipment and weapons need upgrades.

“The equipment inventory still consists predominantly of Soviet-era weaponry. Sustaining and in some cases upgrading these systems is a near-term concern, and equipment replacements will be required over the coming decade in order to forestall potential problems with obsolescence,” reads a section of this year’s “Military Balance” report, prepared by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Still, analysts say an invasion may not be Mr. Putin’s real endgame. The Kremlin seems to be banking on using military force — or the threat of it — to extract concessions from Kyiv and the West. Among the concessions might be guarantees that the U.S. won’t deploy new weapons to Eastern Europe or promises that NATO won’t bring in Ukraine or Georgia as full-fledged members. Mr. Putin has labeled such a move one of his foreign policy “red lines.”

“From Putin’s perspective, he’s got to be asking himself, ‘Why fight for what you can get for free?’” said Mr. Kagan, the AEI scholar.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 US imposes sanctions Chinese drugmakers
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/15/china-painkillers-drugs-us-sanctions
GIST	The US has imposed sanctions on Chinese painkiller makers – including one man described as the biggest producer of anabolic steroids in the world – as it vowed to step up action to curb the addiction epidemic that killed a record 100,000 Americans last year .

With people who are dealing with addiction increasingly turning to cheaper pills bought online from abroad, Joe Biden signed an executive order that makes it easier for the US to target foreign drug traffickers.

The actions “will help disrupt the global supply chain and the financial networks that enable synthetic opioids and precursor chemicals to reach the United States”, the secretary of state, [Antony Blinken](#), said in a statement.

Under the new executive order, the treasury department imposed sanctions on four Chinese chemical companies and one individual, [Chuen Fat Yip](#), whom it described as “one of the largest, if not the largest, producer of anabolic steroids in the world”.

The state department also put up a reward offer of up to \$5m for the arrest of the 68-year-old, who is believed to live in Wuhan.

In federal charges filed in 2018, his company was accused of producing some \$280m of anabolic steroids over five years and of sending ingredients for the painkiller fentanyl through small packages sent around the world.

Last month, US authorities seized the equivalent of \$2.3m in the cryptocurrency bitcoin traced back to Chuen, prosecutors based in Dallas said.

The treasury department also imposed sanctions on two criminal drug groups in [Mexico](#) and one in Brazil.

The sanctions will block any assets in the US that the groups or Chuen may have and criminalize transactions from the United States.

More than 100,000 Americans died in the year through April from overdoses of painkillers, an epidemic initially blamed on how drug companies eagerly promoted their use, and how readily available they became to people in despair.

Painkiller addiction has surged more recently due to a proliferation of fake drugs, often smuggled in from overseas, that can be bought online.

A 2020 report by the US Drug Enforcement Agency said that while Mexican drug traffickers were increasingly producing tablets that are smuggled into the US, the primary source of fentanyl material – some sent to Mexico – was in [China](#).

The report said that [India](#), known for its giant pharmaceutical industry, was also quickly become a source of illicit painkillers.

“I think it’s very simple that a lot of the precursors to synthetic opioids originate in China,” a [Biden administration](#) official said of Wednesday’s actions.

“And it was important for us to send a signal on that front.”

Under heavy pressure from the US, China in April 2019 decreed a ban on fentanyl.

A report last year by the Center for Advanced Defense Studies found that Chinese makers quickly branched out to selling the precursors inside fentanyl, which are not banned and often have legal uses as well.

The [Chinese sellers often sell the ingredients openly on the web](#), helping to secure credibility and customers, it said.

	<p>The prosecutors in Texas said that Chuen was even believed to have traveled to the United States in 2015 to attend a trade show and negotiate transactions.</p> <p>Biden’s executive order allows the US to target foreign drugmakers directly rather than focusing on cartels or other criminal groups, historically the focus of US efforts.</p> <p>Biden also established the US Council on Transnational Organized Crime, which will coordinate among departments to combat transnational crime.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/16 Japan PM: will not attend Beijing Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/16/japan-pm-will-not-attend-beijing-winter-olympics-opening-ceremony
GIST	<p>Japan’s prime minister, Fumio Kishida, has said he will not attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, but it is not clear if the country will join a US-led diplomatic boycott of the Games over human rights abuses.</p> <p>Speaking in parliament on Thursday, Kishida said: “I have no plans at this point to attend” and did not clarify if Japan would send any officials to the event, amid reports that it was unlikely to snub the hosts altogether.</p> <p>Kishida has said only that he will make a decision, possibly by the end of the year, based on Japan’s “national interest”, while media reports said ministers and politicians were likely to skip the Games, with Japan opting instead for the “face-saving” option of sending officials connected to Tokyo 2020, including the president of the organising committee, Seiko Hashimoto.</p> <p>China has accused the US, Britain, Canada and Australia of “political posturing”, and warned them they would “pay a price” after they announced they would not send delegations of officials and politicians to Beijing. Their athletes will compete, however.</p> <p>Countries taking part in the boycott said they were protesting against China’s human rights abuses, including its treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province, the crackdown on democracy and freedoms in Hong Kong and the repression of Tibet.</p> <p>The boycott has placed Japan, a key US ally in the Asia-Pacific, in a difficult position less than two months before the Games are due to open.</p> <p>Japan has deep economic ties with China – its biggest trading partner – and will not want to appear to snub Beijing ahead of next year’s 50th anniversary of the normalisation of diplomatic relations.</p> <p>In addition, Chinese officials supported the decision to go ahead with this summer’s Olympics in Tokyo, despite widespread public opposition due to fears over the coronavirus.</p> <p>The South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, said this week his country would not join the boycott, describing the Games – which run from 4-20 February – as “positive” for Seoul’s relations with Beijing.</p> <p>Wang Wenbin, a spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry, welcomed Moon’s announcement, but warned Japan that “politicising sport is contrary to the spirit of the Olympic charter”.</p> <p>In a break with other G7 nations, France, which is due to host the 2024 summer Games, has said it will send high-level officials to Beijing.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Fed shifts to inflation fighting; less stimulus
----------	--

SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/business/economy/inflation-fed-fomc-meeting-december-2021.html
GIST	<p>Federal Reserve policymakers moved into inflation-fighting mode on Wednesday, saying they would cut back more quickly on their pandemic-era stimulus at a moment of rising prices and strong economic growth, capping a challenging year with a policy shift that could usher in higher interest rates in 2022.</p> <p>The central bank's policy statement set up a more rapid end to the monthly bond-buying program that the Fed has been using throughout the pandemic to keep money chugging through markets and to bolster growth. A fresh set of economic projections released on Wednesday showed that officials expect to raise interest rates, which are now set near-zero, three times next year.</p> <p>"Economic developments and changes in the outlook warrant this evolution," Jerome H. Powell, the Fed chair, said of the decision to pull back on bond purchases more quickly.</p> <p>By tapering off its bond buying faster, the Fed is doing less to stimulate the economy with each passing month, and putting the program on track to end completely in March.</p> <p>That would place Fed policymakers in a position to raise interest rates — their more traditional and more powerful tool — sooner. The Fed has made clear it wants to end its bond-buying program before it raises rates, which would cool off demand by making it more expensive to borrow for a home, a car or expanding a business. That would in turn weigh on growth and, eventually, price gains. The Fed's new economic projections suggested rates, which have been at rock-bottom since March 2020, might rise to 2.1 percent by the end of 2024.</p> <p>The Fed's final meeting of the year completed its decisive shift away from providing full-blast support to the economy and toward guarding against the risk of rapid and lasting inflation. While officials spent much of the year laying out a patient path for weaning the economy off the Fed's pandemic support, they have become more worried that a burst in prices this year could linger, resulting in a more proactive stance.</p> <p>Central bank officials, who are supposed to maintain price stability and foster full employment, have also been encouraged by strengthening in the job market.</p> <p>"In my view we are making rapid progress toward maximum employment," Mr. Powell said in his remarks. Fed officials estimated in their new economic projections that the unemployment rate would return to its prepandemic level of 3.5 percent by the end of 2022 — sooner than they had previously forecast.</p> <p>Still, inflation has been higher and broader and has lasted longer than policymakers had anticipated. Consumer prices climbed 6.8 percent in November from a year earlier, the quickest pace of increase since 1982. The Fed's preferred inflation gauge has shown slightly slower gains but has also moved up sharply.</p> <p>Some economists have warned that the new Omicron variant of the coronavirus could allow elevated inflation to linger if it further disrupts supply chains and causes factories to shut down for periods of time. Mr. Powell on Wednesday acknowledged that the spreading virus was a risk that contributed to economic uncertainty.</p> <p>"The rise in Covid cases in recent weeks, along with the emergence of the Omicron variant, pose risks to the outlook," he said.</p> <p>The Fed chair said that a quicker conclusion to bond buying — which officials first announced they would slow following their November meeting — would put policymakers in a position to react to a range of possible economic outcomes next year. And asked if there would be a big gap between when bond buying ended and when rate increases began, as there was during the last economic rebound, Mr. Powell said the situation was different this time.</p>

“The economy is so much stronger now,” Mr. Powell said, later adding that “there wouldn’t be the need for that kind of long delay.”

Mr. Powell’s public shift to sounding more concerned about inflation came shortly after President Biden announced on Nov. 22 that he would appoint him to a second term as chair, saying he believed Mr. Powell would focus on both the need to control inflation and fostering a strong economy that creates jobs and pushes wages higher.

That timing fueled speculation about whether Mr. Powell turned toward fighting inflation and putting less primacy on keeping borrowing cheap once he had secured reappointment — or that his reappointment gave him a new mandate to act more boldly, knowing he would be around to carry out the plan.

But Mr. Powell batted back that idea on Wednesday, providing a detailed look at his own evolution in thinking about inflation and the data that convinced him the Fed needed to speed up its plans.

“It had nothing to do with it at all,” he said of the reappointment, noting that other Fed officials were already setting up the change in policy before Mr. Biden’s decision was announced. “My colleagues were out there talking about a faster taper, and that doesn’t happen by accident.”

Mr. Powell, his colleagues and many economists had initially expected rapid price gains to fade fairly quickly as the economy got through a bumpy reopening period after lockdowns meant to contain the pandemic.

But Mr. Powell said his shift began after Labor Day, as the job market showed signs of strengthening and inflation readings remained elevated. Just before the Fed’s last meeting on Nov. 2-3, wages moved up sharply in the Employment Cost Index, which tracks how much employers are spending on their workers.

“We got the E.C.I. reading on the eve of the November meeting and it was very high,” Mr. Powell said, adding that index was so elevated he briefly considered announcing a faster end to the bond buying than what policymakers ultimately announced.

“I thought for a second there whether we should increase our taper,” he said. Then additional data poured in, showing signs of rapid inflation that was broadening into categories that were not simply roiled by the pandemic: Rents were rising, for instance. Labor market progress also proved “much faster,” prompting the change in tone and approach.

Many policymakers still hold out hope that inflation will fade back toward the Fed’s 2 percent annual average goal as global shipping routes clear through backlogs, factory production increases to meet demand, and consumers shift toward more normal spending patterns after scrambling to buy lawn equipment and stationary bikes during the pandemic.

The strong labor market seems to have made the Fed’s change in tone and approach easier. Because the job market is healing so swiftly, officials can be less concerned about slowing it down as they move to control prices.

The jobless rate has fallen to 4.2 percent, down sharply from the double-digits heights it reached early in the pandemic. Still, many people remain out of the labor market — some because they have retired, but others because of virus fears or a lack of child care. That is making judging how close the economy is to the Fed’s goal of “maximum employment” a more complicated task.

That said, “with each appearance, the chair appears less hopeful that labor force participation will bounce back soon,” Michael Feroli, chief U.S. economist at J.P. Morgan, wrote in a research note after the announcement. “Instead, the emphasis has turned to the traditional unemployment rate.”

	<p>Mr. Powell on Wednesday suggested that the return to a higher participation rate might take time, because the pandemic had disrupted people's working lives in meaningful ways. And he hinted that lower labor force participation wouldn't keep the Fed from raising interest rates.</p> <p>He said that coaxing people back into the labor market would require a long expansion.</p> <p>"To make that happen, we need to make sure we maintain price stability," Mr. Powell said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 US: highest known virus death toll in world
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#covid-deaths-in-the-united-states-surpass-800000
GIST	<p>Coronavirus deaths in the United States surpassed 800,000 on Wednesday, according to a New York Times database, as the pandemic neared the end of a second year and as known virus cases in this country rose above 50 million.</p> <p>The new death toll — the highest known number of any country — comes a year after vaccines against the coronavirus began rolling out in the United States. It also comes at a tenuous moment in the pandemic: Cases are rising once again, hospitals in some parts of the country are stretched to their limits with Covid patients and the threat and uncertainties of a new variant loom.</p> <p>More than 1,200 people in the United States are dying from Covid-19 each day.</p> <p>The last 100,000 deaths occurred in less than 11 weeks as the pace of death has picked up, moving faster than at any time other than last winter's surge. The current uptick is being driven by the Delta variant. It is not yet known how the Omicron variant, which continues to emerge in more states, might affect those trends in the coming weeks and months.</p> <p>Naoko Muramatsu, a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago's School of Public Health, said that from the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, older people have suffered disproportionately.</p> <p>"Early on, Covid was considered to be an older people's problem," she said. Nearly two years later, those difficulties have persisted, whether in the form of a high death rate or isolation, which in many cases already existed but expanded significantly as the months wore on. Older people steered clear of crowded public gatherings and younger relatives stayed away, fearful of exposing those more vulnerable to the virus.</p> <p>Some 75 percent of the 800,000 Covid-19 deaths have involved people 65 or older. One in 100 older Americans has died. Countless others have found themselves isolated.</p> <p>"Covid really made something visible that was already going on for older adults," she said. "Older people were so vulnerable."</p> <p>After the first known coronavirus death in the United States in February 2020, the virus's death toll in this country reached 100,000 people in only three months. The pace of deaths slowed throughout summer 2020, then quickened throughout the fall and winter, and then slowed again this spring and summer.</p> <p>Throughout the summer, most people dying from the virus were concentrated in the South. But the most recent 100,000 deaths — beginning in early October — have spread out across the nation, in a broad belt across the middle of the country from Pennsylvania to Texas, the Mountain West and Michigan.</p> <p>The benchmark of 800,000 deaths in the United States occurred despite the wide availability of vaccines for most of 2021.</p>

	<p>Older people have been vaccinated at a much higher rate than younger age groups and yet the brutal effects of the virus on them has persisted. The share of younger people among all virus deaths in the United States increased this year, but, in the last two months, the portion of older people has risen once again, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>By now, Covid-19 has become the third leading cause of death among Americans 65 and older, after heart disease and cancer. It is responsible for about 13 percent of all deaths in that age group since the beginning of 2020, more than diabetes, accidents, Alzheimer's disease or dementia.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Boosters strong protection against omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#booster-doses-of-the-moderna-and-pfizer-vaccines-are-likely-to-offer-substantial-protection-from-omicron-fauci-says
GIST	<p>A flurry of new laboratory studies indicate that vaccines, and especially boosters, may protect against the worst outcomes of the fast-spreading Omicron variant. It will, however, still cause breakthrough infections in vaccinated people and those who have been infected with older versions of the virus, the research says.</p> <p>At a World Health Organization meeting on Wednesday, scientists reported on research suggesting that T cells in vaccinated people can put up a tough defense against the variant, which could help prevent severe disease, hospitalization and death.</p> <p>Also on Wednesday, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, President Biden's top medical adviser for the coronavirus response, in discussing preliminary data from his institute's analysis of the Moderna vaccine, said two shots produced a negligible antibody response in the laboratory, but protection shot up after a third dose. Others presented similar results, showing that mRNA boosters raised antibodies to levels believed high enough to offer strong protection against infection.</p> <p>Though the research is preliminary and conducted in vitro, the news is nevertheless a welcome departure from the torrent of worrying data about Omicron, which can deftly evade antibodies, one reason infections may have exploded in many countries. But T cells also have a role.</p> <p>"The good news is that T cell responses are largely maintained to Omicron," said Wendy Burgers of the University of Cape Town, presenting recent research.</p> <p>Omicron infections are striking in those who have received shots, as well as those who aren't vaccinated but have recovered from a coronavirus infection. South African scientists said two doses of the Pfizer vaccine were 33 percent effective against Omicron, down from about 80 percent before Omicron.</p> <p>The study found that two doses of the Pfizer vaccine offered 70 percent protection against death or severe cases requiring hospitalization, down from about 95 percent before Omicron was detected.</p> <p>At the W.H.O. meeting, one scientist after another presented similar findings showing that vaccine-induced antibodies performed less well against Omicron than against other variants.</p> <p>But boosters seem to provide enough extra protection. Dr. Fauci described experiments at the National Institutes of Health that mixed blood serum from people who had had two doses of Moderna and serum from those who had also had a third dose with viruses engineered to carry Omicron's surface proteins.</p> <p>These "pseudoviruses" evaded many antibodies from people who had received two doses, but the level of antibodies conferred by the boosters blocked viruses from invading cells.</p> <p>"So the message remains clear: If you are unvaccinated get vaccinated, and particularly in the arena of Omicron, if you are fully vaccinated, get your booster shot," Dr. Fauci said.</p>

	<p>That admonition comes as Biden administration officials are bracing for a potential wave of Omicron infections that could overwhelm the health care system. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned recently that the percentage of coronavirus cases in the United States caused by the Omicron variant had increased sharply, which might portend a significant surge as soon as next month.</p> <p>Many countries are rushing boosters to their populations, but Omicron is spreading so fast it may well outstrip even the best efforts.</p> <p>“The projected transmission rates, if borne out, do not give us much time for interventions,” Phil Krause, a former vaccine regulator at the Food and Drug Administration, said at the W.H.O. meeting. That prospect has led many scientists to hope that T cells will serve as an effective backup when antibodies fail. If they can fight Omicron, they may prevent many infections from turning into severe disease.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Total health spending reached record level
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#overall-health-spending-record-2020
GIST	<p>The Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented trends in health spending last year — with overall health spending reaching its largest share of the U.S. economy ever at 19.7 percent, or \$12,530 per person. But direct spending on medical care was lower than it was in 2019.</p> <p>A new report from the actuaries at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, published Wednesday in the journal Health Affairs, found that total health spending in the economy grew to \$4.1 trillion in 2020, a leap that represented the highest rate of increase since 2002. But nearly all of that growth came from emergency government spending on the pandemic — the effort to rapidly develop Covid vaccinations, infusions of dollars into public health, and economic stimulus spending to states, hospitals and medical providers, meant to insulate them from the shock of shutdowns in the early days of the pandemic.</p> <p>“Obviously, 2020 was like no other year we’ve estimated in the history of the accounts,” said Aaron Catlin, a deputy director in the Medicare actuary’s national health statistics group.</p> <p>Spending in most normal categories of health care actually went down. Health spending by businesses, individuals and state and local governments all fell. Direct spending by individuals and health insurers on medical services at hospitals, doctors and dentists also declined.</p> <p>But federal programs authorized by Congress pumped unusual amounts of money into the health care system, by offering hospitals and medical practices forgivable loans, increasing the federal share of Medicaid spending, and investing billions in public health and vaccine development programs.</p> <p>Federal spending on health care grew by 36 percent overall. Overall spending on health care that did not include public health spending or special pandemic programs grew by 1.2 percent.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Britain breaks daily record new virus cases
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#uk-covid-record-cases
GIST	<p>LONDON — Britain reported 78,610 new coronavirus cases on Wednesday, the highest number of infections in a single day since the start of the pandemic, and stark confirmation that the Omicron variant is rampaging across the country.</p> <p>New cases spiked by a third since Tuesday; the number is more than 10,000 higher than the previous worst day for infections, Jan. 8, when the Alpha variant was ravaging the country. The seven-day average of new cases is 65,008, a 19.1 percent increase over the previous seven-day period. Officials didn’t specify what share of the new cases might be Omicron, though they said a majority in London were from the variant.</p> <p>Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, warned that further records would be broken in coming days, with the Omicron variant doubling at a rate of less than every two days in parts of the</p>

country. While the effect on hospitalization and mortality rates remains unclear, he warned that Britain's National Health Service would face a deluge of patients simply because the growth in cases was so explosive.

"This is a really serious threat," Dr. Whitty said at a news conference, alongside Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the medical director of primary care for N.H.S. England, Nikki Kanani. "It is moving at an absolutely phenomenal pace."

Mr. Johnson redoubled his campaign for people to get vaccine booster shots. About 650,000 people received shots on Tuesday, another record-breaking day. Mr. Johnson has set a goal of delivering boosters to all adults by the end of the month, a target that would require administering more than 1 million shots a day.

While Mr. Johnson did not announce any additional restrictions on Wednesday, he urged the public to be judicious in socializing during the holidays. Parliament on Tuesday [passed the government's plan to impose a system of vaccine certification](#) to enter nightclubs and large indoor venues, though nearly 100 members of Mr. Johnson's Conservative Party voted against the measure.

"We're not canceling people's parties," Mr. Johnson said. "What we are saying is, think carefully before you go."

The prime minister has been under fierce political pressure in recent weeks after reports that his staff held holiday gatherings at Downing Street last year, at a time when the government was instructing people not to meet with friends or even family members. A report on those allegations is expected to be released in coming days, and Mr. Johnson said he welcomed the investigation.

While there is preliminary evidence from South Africa that the Omicron variant is less severe than previous variants, Dr. Whitty cautioned against over-interpreting the data.

In Britain, 774 people were admitted to hospitals on Wednesday, a 10.4 percent increase over the last seven-day period, while 165 people died, a 5 percent decline over the seven previous days.

Omicron's spread has been particularly dramatic in London, where the vaccination rate is lower than other parts of the country. The prime minister said hospitalization rates in London were up by a third.

"We've got two epidemics on top of each other," Dr. Whitty said, "a flat Delta epidemic and a rapidly growing Omicron epidemic."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 CDC: first Covid testing kits had design flaw
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/world/covid-omicron-vaccines#the-cdcs-first-coronavirus-tests-were-contaminated-and-poorly-designed-the-agency-says
GIST	<p>The faulty coronavirus testing kits developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the early weeks of the pandemic were not only contaminated but had a basic design flaw, according to an internal review by the agency.</p> <p>Health officials had already acknowledged that the test kits were contaminated, but the internal report, whose findings were published in PLOS ONE on Wednesday, also documented a design error that caused false positives.</p> <p>The distribution of faulty test kits, at a time when no other tests were authorized, set back health officials' efforts to detect and track the virus.</p>

	<p>“It delayed the availability of more widespread testing,” said Dr. Benjamin Pinsky, the director of clinical virology for Stanford Health Care. He added, “I think it’s important that they got to the bottom of what went wrong.”</p> <p>In January 2020, the C.D.C. developed a polymerase chain reaction, or P.C.R., test for the virus. P.C.R. tests, which are performed in laboratories, can detect the virus at very low levels and have been considered the gold standard for diagnosing a coronavirus infection.</p> <p>Problems emerged soon after the C.D.C. had begun shipping its test kits out to public health laboratories in early February. Within days, many labs were reporting that the tests were generating inconclusive results.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Tornadoes, high winds sweep central states
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/us/midwest-storms-tornado-news#midwest-tornado-warning
GIST	<p>A storm system generated tornadoes, dust clouds and unusually powerful winds as it moved through parts of the central United States on Wednesday, days after tornadoes whipped through some of the same terrain and killed at least 88 people.</p> <p>The storms on Wednesday caused scattered damage, prompted at least 19 reports of tornadoes in the Midwest, and forced the temporary evacuation of the main air traffic control tower in Kansas City, Mo. The low-pressure system was expected to reach southern Canada on Thursday.</p> <p>As midnight came and went in the Midwest, there were no immediate reports of significant damage or injuries. But gusts of 70 miles per hour were still whipping across Minnesota, powerful enough to topple trees and power lines.</p> <p>Even in communities where winds were tapering off, it was obvious that the day’s weather had been highly abnormal. The National Weather Service said after 10 p.m. that the United States had registered 55 hurricane-force thunderstorm wind gusts throughout the day, the highest daily number since 2004.</p> <p>Reported Tornadoes</p> <p>Tornadoes were reported on Wednesday from about 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. Central time.</p> <p>Extreme weather came in several forms on Wednesday, from dust storms in Colorado and Kansas to a tornado that tore through Lincoln, Neb. Images circulating on social media showed damage to hangars and small planes at the Santa Fe Regional Airport in New Mexico.</p> <p>In Iowa, transportation officials were shutting down bridges and warning drivers to stay off roads. And in Omaha, meteorologists for the National Weather Service had to briefly suspend their work as they sheltered from a storm.</p> <p>The storm system also spawned wildfires and winds of up to 100 miles per hour in Kansas, the local authorities said. The National Weather Service warned on Wednesday afternoon that outages would exacerbate the risk of fires in Kansas and parts of Texas and Oklahoma. By Wednesday night more than 450,000 customers were without power across the Midwest, according to the monitoring site poweroutage.us.</p> <p>Some of the data trickling out from weather departments across the central United States on Wednesday was notable for its historical anomalies.</p> <p>As storms moved through South Dakota, the Weather Service office in Sioux Falls issued its first tornado warning on record for the month of December, a spokesman for the Weather Service said.</p>

	<p>And in Iowa, where schools closed early and some areas saw wind gusts of up to 90 m.p.h., high temperatures reached the lower 70s. On average, high temperatures in December throughout much of the state are in the 30s, according to the Weather Service.</p> <p>“The storm system is unprecedented,” said Andrew Ansorge, a meteorologist with the Weather Service in Des Moines. “We don’t have anything to compare it to.”</p> <p>“Off the charts is the best way to say it,” he added.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Storm system unprecedented Midwest Dec.
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/us/midwest-storms-tornado-news#storm-systems-like-this-are-highly-unusual-for-the-midwest-in-december
GIST	<p>A powerful storm system moved through the Central United States on Wednesday, prompting a series of tornado watches and warnings, just days after a destructive series of tornadoes tore through at least six states.</p> <p>The back-to-back weather events on Friday and Wednesday are unusual in December, with tornadoes typically occurring in the spring in the United States.</p> <p>“The storm system is unprecedented,” said Andrew Ansorge, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Des Moines. “We don’t have anything to compare it to.”</p> <p>As storms moved through South Dakota, the National Weather Service office in Sioux Falls issued its first tornado warning on record for the month of December, a spokesman for the Weather Service said.</p> <p>A string of tornado warnings were also issued in Nebraska on Wednesday afternoon. Since 1950, Nebraska has recorded only two December tornadoes, which both occurred in 1975, according to the National Weather Service.</p> <p>A tornado watch on Wednesday night extended into parts of Wisconsin, a state that has only recorded six tornadoes during the month of December since 1844, according to the Weather Service.</p> <p>What prompted the unusual December weather events is unclear. The ingredients that give rise to tornadoes include warm, moist air at ground level; cool dry air higher up; and wind shear, which is the change in wind speed or direction. Each of these factors may be affected differently by climate change.</p> <p>Friday’s tornadoes may have occurred because the wind shear was high (it tends to peak in the winter) and the weather was warmer than normal. This year, the region has experienced an uncharacteristically warm December, and temperatures in Arkansas and Kansas on Friday were in the 70s and 80s.</p> <p>Parts of the Midwest also experienced daily record high temperatures on Wednesday. In Iowa, record high temperatures reached the lower 70s, nearly double the average high. On average, high temperatures in December throughout much of Iowa are in the 30s, according to the Weather Service.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Effects of climate change on tornadoes?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/15/us/midwest-storms-tornado-news#tornado-climate-change
GIST	<p>The deadly tornadoes that pummeled six states on Friday, killing more than 80 people and leaving dozens missing, came at the end of a year of compounding extreme weather events, from heat waves and hurricanes to flooding and wildfires.</p> <p>Scientists have been able to draw links between a warming planet and hurricanes, heat waves and droughts, attributing the likelihood that climate change played a role in individual isolated events. The same can’t be said for tornadoes yet.</p>

“This is the hardest phenomenon to connect to climate change,” said Michael Tippett, an associate professor of applied physics and mathematics at Columbia University who studies extreme weather and climate.

Even as scientists are discovering trends around tornadoes and their behavior, it remains unclear the role that climate change plays. “For a lot of our questions about climate change and tornadoes, the answer is we don’t know,” said Harold Brooks, a senior research scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Severe Storms Laboratory. “We don’t see evidence for changes in average annual occurrence or intensity over the last 40 to 60 years.”

What causes a tornado?

Tornadoes form inside large rotating thunderstorms and the ingredients have to be just right. Tornadoes occur when there is a perfect mix of temperature, moisture profile and wind profile.

When the air is unstable, cold air is pushed over warmer humid air, creating an updraft as the warm air rises. When a wind’s speed or direction changes over a short distance, the air inside the clouds can start to spin. If the air column begins spinning vertically and rotates near the ground, it can intensify the friction on Earth’s surface, accelerating the air inward, forming a tornado.

How are they measured?

Like hurricanes and earthquakes, tornadoes are rated on a scale. The Enhanced Fujita, or EF, scale, runs from 0 to 5.

The tornado that traveled across Northeast Arkansas, Tennessee and western Kentucky over the weekend was estimated to be three-quarters of a mile wide with wind speeds that peaked between 158 and 206 miles per hour, giving it a EF rank of at least 3.

Because it’s challenging to measure the winds in a tornado directly, surveyors usually evaluate tornadoes by their level of damage to different structures.

For instance, they may look to see if the damage is limited to missing roof shingles or whether entire sections of roofs or walls are missing. Based on the level of damage, scientists then reverse-engineer the wind speeds and assign a tornado a rating on the scale.

Have tornadoes changed over the years?

Researchers say that in recent years tornadoes seem to be occurring in greater “clusters,” and that the region known as tornado alley in the Great Plains, where most tornadoes occur, appears to be [shifting eastward](#). The overall number of tornadoes annually is holding steady around 1,200.

Tornadoes in the United States in December are unusual. They typically occur in the spring. Friday’s tornadoes may have occurred because the wind shear was high (it tends to peak in the winter) and the weather was warmer than normal. This year, the region has experienced an uncharacteristically warm December, and temperatures in Arkansas and Kansas on Friday were in the 70s and 80s.

Is climate change the cause?

The ingredients that give rise to tornadoes include warm, moist air at ground level; cool dry air higher up; and wind shear, which is the change in wind speed or direction. Each of these factors may be affected differently by climate change.

As the planet warms and the climate changes, “we don’t think they are all going to go in the same direction,” said Dr. Brooks of NOAA. For instance, overall temperature and humidity, which provide energy in the air, may rise with a warming climate, but wind shear may not.

“If there is not enough shear to make something rotate, it doesn’t matter how strong the energy is,” he said. “If there is all kind of wind shear, but you don’t have a storm, you won’t get a tornado, either.”

Although we know that climate change may be playing a role in making some storms more powerful, the complexity of tornadoes means that it is hard to extend that connection with certainty, especially for an individual event.

Scale is everything

A tornado's relatively small size also makes it harder to model, the primary tool that scientists use when attributing extreme weather events to climate change. "We are working at such small scales that the model you would use to do the attribution studies just can't capture the phenomenon," Dr. Brooks said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Canada warns against non-essential travel
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/world/americas/canada-travel-warning-omicron.html
GIST	<p>For travelers from Canada who are unclear what to do about holiday plans in international destinations, the federal government issued new guidance on Wednesday that could tip the scales: Consider canceling your trip.</p> <p>Since early November, Canada has seen a steady rebound in coronavirus cases, according to a Dec. 10 epidemiology report published by the country's public health agency. Now, with the rise of the Omicron variant — which spurred travel restrictions around the globe connected to several countries in southern Africa — the Canadian government has issued an advisory against all nonessential travel just over a week before Christmas.</p> <p>"To those who were planning to travel, I say very clearly, now is not the time to travel," the country's health minister, Jean-Yves Duclos, said at a news conference on Wednesday afternoon.</p> <p>The advisory will be in effect for four weeks and will then be re-evaluated. The government also plans to increase testing at the border, Mr. Duclos said, and will provide more detail in future announcements.</p> <p>The Dec. 10 epidemiology report also shows that fewer than 1 percent of Covid-19 infections were contracted during international travel and that fewer than 1 percent were linked to an exposure to someone who had traveled.</p> <p>Yet Mr. Duclos said avoiding travel was smart because Canadians abroad may not be able to gain access to health care if they get sick during travel.</p> <p>"The situation abroad is already dire in many places," Mr. Duclos said. "Once they have left Canada, there is very little we can do to help them."</p> <p>Fully vaccinated Canadians traveling by air or land for less than 72 hours will still be able to return home without providing proof of a negative coronavirus test, the country's transportation minister, Omar Alghabra, said.</p> <p>Over 76 percent of Canadians are fully vaccinated, according to federal data, with unvaccinated patients accounting for more than three-quarters of hospitalizations and deaths reported to the public health agency as of November.</p> <p>As the holidays near, the country's most populated province, Ontario, is recommending that personal gatherings be limited to 25 people as cases mount, fueled in part by the spread of new variants, including Omicron, which is estimated to infect 7.7 times as many people as the Delta variant, provincial health experts reported.</p> <p>Provinces are racing to offer booster doses and free rapid antigen tests to Canadians through the holiday season, with an inventory of 16 million booster doses currently available and 35 million rapid tests scheduled for distribution by the federal government.</p>

HEADLINE	12/15 Russia, China leaders laud close ties
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-china-ukraine-putin-xi-call-nato-tension/
GIST	<p>Moscow — After a week of tough phone calls with European leaders, Russian President Vladimir Putin turned to a friendlier ear on Wednesday to hold a video meeting with his Chinese counterpart, President Xi Jinping.</p> <p>With tension high and still mounting between the West and both of their countries, Putin and Xi praised strengthening Russia-China ties, with the Russian leader calling them "a true example of interstate cooperation in the 21st century."</p> <p>"A new model of cooperation has been formed between our countries, based, among other things, on the principles of non-interference in internal affairs and respect for each other's interests, and the determination to turn the common border into a belt of eternal peace and good-neighborliness," Putin declared in televised remarks after the virtual meeting.</p> <p>Xi highlighted his closeness with Putin by noting that it was the 37th direct discussion held between the two leaders since 2013. Putin also said he planned to meet Xi in person in Beijing in February and take part in the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics, which the U.S. and some of its allies are diplomatically boycotting.</p> <p>"I would like to note that we have always supported each other on issues of international sports cooperation, including in rejecting any attempts to politicize sport and the Olympic movement," Putin said in reference to the U.S. decision not to send government officials to the Games.</p> <p>Amid soaring tension between Moscow and Washington over Russia's military buildup along the Ukrainian border, Putin has had a series of calls over the last week with European leaders to demand guarantees that NATO will not seek to expand further eastward, toward Russia's border.</p> <p>Putin's government has made it clear that Ukraine joining the transatlantic defense alliance would be a "red line" for the Kremlin. Ukraine, a U.S. and European Union ally, is actively seeking NATO membership, and the Biden administration has refused to rule it out, insisting it is a matter for Ukraine's sovereign government and NATO members to decide.</p> <p>U.S. officials, meanwhile, have rung alarm bells for weeks over Russia's massing of tens of thousands of troops along its border with Ukraine. The White House has been warning European allies that Moscow could even launch another invasion of Ukraine this winter.</p> <p>The Kremlin insists it has no nefarious intentions and the troops deployed on Russia's own soil pose no threat to Ukraine. Putin and other officials routinely accuse NATO and the West of being the aggressor, by beefing up troop presence on the Ukrainian side and in other eastern European countries.</p> <p>The U.S. and the EU have warned Russia that any military action against Ukraine would be met with a coordinated barrage of economic sanctions.</p> <p>On Tuesday, in a phone call with the Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, whose country has often served as neutral ground for contacts between Moscow and Western capitals, Putin demanded "immediate" security talks with NATO.</p> <p>"Vladimir Putin again stressed the importance of immediately starting talks with the United States and NATO," the Kremlin said in a readout. "The goal of the talks would be to draft international legal security guarantees for Russia, ruling out NATO's further movement eastward and the deployment of weapons systems threatening Russia in Ukraine and other adjacent states."</p>

	<p>Putin reiterated the same demands in a phone call with French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday, as the Russian military said it was monitoring a French warship in the Black Sea.</p> <p>Putin's meeting with Xi came a day after Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov warned that Moscow could resort to military action if the ongoing discussions with European leaders fail to resolve the standoff over Ukraine and NATO.</p> <p>"The lack of progress towards a political-diplomatic solution to this problem will lead to the fact that we will respond militarily," Ryabkov told the state-run news agency RIA Novosti.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Some Kentucky towns no power for months
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/power-restoration-kentucky-tornadoes-weeks-months/
GIST	<p>The slew of tornadoes that killed dozens of people across multiple states Friday night left thousands of residents without electricity. Now, officials estimate restoring power to one of Kentucky's hardest hit towns could take months.</p> <p>All Mayfield Electric and Water Systems customers are without power, according to PowerOutage.us. The energy provider, which services more than half of the city of Mayfield, has not frequently updated its service status due to the severe weather. But, state officials confirmed that repairs in Mayfield are slow-moving.</p> <p>"We're making extraordinary progress for damage this significant across our commonwealth. Now that does not include Mayfield's electric. It doesn't exist. So, that will take weeks and months to rebuild," Kentucky Emergency Management Director Michael Dossett said at a press conference.</p> <p>Power has been restored to more than 10,000 customers in Kentucky since the storms hit late last week. Dossett asked residents in the state to be patient as restoration efforts are underway.</p> <p>"We're here during the winter months," he said. "It's cold outside in normal operations."</p> <p>Mayfield Electric and Water Systems is also struggling to meet the town's water demand. On Monday, it asked customers to conserve water and avoid non-essential tasks. "Water demand is so heavy right now, our system cannot keep up," the company tweeted.</p> <p>At least 71 people have died and more than 100 are still accounted for after one of "the worst tornado events" in Kentucky's history, according to Governor Andy Beshear. Officials said they do not believe the death count will be finalized for several more days.</p> <p>At least 14 more people were killed in other states, including Arkansas, Illinois, Tennessee and Missouri. Crews have begun clearing the storm's debris while continuing to assess the damage.</p> <p>President Joe Biden visited Kentucky on Wednesday and said he intends to do "whatever it takes as long as it takes" to support the state.</p> <p>"The scope and scale of this destruction is almost beyond belief when you look around here," Mr. Biden said. "It's just almost beyond belief. These tornadoes devoured everything in their path."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Japan stopped Covid dead in its tracks
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-japan-stopped-covid-dead-in-its-tracks?ref=home
GIST	<p>COVID cases are on the rise all over the world. The onset of winter in the northern hemisphere, the rapid spread of the new and more transmissible Omicron variant, and the stubbornness of the previous variant, Delta, have all contributed to a surge in infections, hospitalizations, and deaths in many countries.</p>

But not in Japan. In Japan, COVID has all but disappeared. And it's *mostly* clear why.

"It always comes down to vaccines, to social restrictions [on] large gatherings, mask-wearing," Dale Fisher, group chief of medicine at Singapore's National University Health System, told The Daily Beast. "There's no secret code that any country has discovered."

While many countries including the United States struggle against a stubborn minority of fervent anti-vaxxers, Japan has quietly vaccinated [80 percent](#) of its 126 million people. That's nearly everyone who's over 5 years old and thus eligible.

In a lot of countries, mask mandates are deeply controversial. But not in Japan, where many people habitually wore masks in public even before the pandemic.

When SARS-CoV-2 first came to Japan, the country suffered like every other country did, scrambling to contain the virus through a combination of business and school closures, mask mandates, contact-tracing, quarantines, and travel bans.

More than 18,000 Japanese have died. That's [14 out of every 100,000 people in the country](#), compared to 127 out of 100,000 in Germany and a staggering 242 out of 100,000 in the U.S.

Once vaccines were widely available starting this spring, however, Japan showed the world that it's special, if not quite unique. There are a few other countries that are as highly vaxxed as Japan is—[Singapore](#) and Israel, to name a couple. But even those two countries are registering a lot more new cases than Japan is right now. Last week, authorities in Tokyo [reported](#) just 113 new infections a day on average. Israeli officials reported 615 cases a day in a population of 9 million people. Singapore, with fewer than 6 million people, reported 645 a day.

The U.S., by the way, is back up to 120,000 new infections a day as COVID rips through the 40 percent of the population that has refused to get vaccinated or, in the case of kids under 5, isn't eligible yet.

Japan is beating COVID primarily by steadily vaccinating everyone. Remarkably, it did so without really mandating jabs anywhere. "Vaccines will never be administered without the recipient's consent," Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida [vowed on his official website](#). "We urge the public never to coerce vaccinations at the workplace or upon others around them, and never to treat those who have not received the vaccine in a discriminatory manner."

That lack of coercion didn't seem to matter. It took just five months for almost all eligible Japanese to get jabbed.

That community-mindedness is equally apparent when it comes to masks, which experts stress are still key tools for preventing the virus's spread even where good vaccines are free and readily available. When it comes to masks, in Japan "there's just an acceptance," Fisher explained. "It does reflect on the society."

But even widespread vaxxing and masking don't totally explain Japan's success suppressing the virus, Taro Yamamoto, chairman of the Department of International Health at the Institute of Tropical Medicine at Nagasaki University, told The Daily Beast. "It's not clear at this point what other factors are involved," Yamamoto said.

The Japanese government has adopted sound COVID policies and the Japanese people, demonstrating what to Americans might seem like an unusual degree of trust in their leaders and each other, have gone right along. Plus, the country appears to just be... lucky. "I don't believe Japan has a secret formula," Fisher said.

If there's a caveat, it's that one of the most stringent policies—on-again, off-again bans on travel to Japan—isn't really helping. Japan was all but inaccessible to non-resident foreigners for two years. Tokyo

was just about to start relaxing the travel ban when Omicron first appeared. Now Japan remains closed to most outsiders.

But two years into a global pandemic, where the virus has already found its way into every region of every country, border-closings simply don't work any more, Fisher said. "Travel restrictions are a false sense of security."

Pointless travel ban aside, it looks like Japan is winning its war on COVID. But experts warn that could change. There are worrying signs that the new Omicron variant makes the standard, two-dose regimen of the messenger-RNA vaccines [less effective](#).

A third shot—a booster—[should help](#). But compared to other rich countries, Japan has been slow to offer boosters to the general population. The government authorized health-care workers to get boosted starting Dec. 1. That was an obvious first step, as health workers are at elevated risk—and since many workers in the health-care industry were first in line to get vaccinated and thus might, by now, be losing some of their vaccine-induced antibodies.

The government wants people to wait until eight months after their prime immunizations to get boosted, meaning everyday people who don't work in health care aren't yet eligible. After all, widespread vaccination didn't get underway in Japan until early summer.

But Omicron won't wait. Tokyo knows it needs to speed up booster eligibility, but hasn't yet come up with a plan. "We are hoping to determine the effect of the existing vaccines on the Omicron strain as soon as possible, and then show the scope and method of moving up booster shots," Kishida [told legislators last week](#).

Even if the government immediately authorizes everyone to get boosted, Japan will still be behind many other countries as far as third shots are concerned. The U.S. for all its scattershot approach to COVID at least has moved quickly on boosters. The U.S. Food and Drug administration has authorized everyone 16 and older to get a third shot. [A quarter of Americans are already boosted](#).

Japanese officials [have tallied](#) just a dozen or so Omicron cases in the country. But the variant may yet become dominant in Japan. And if Omicron takes over before large numbers of residents can get their boosters, the variant's potential to evade prime vaccination could leave Japan vulnerable.

"We are just at the beginning of winter so it is quite possible that they will see a surge in January [to] February," Paul Ananth, president of the Asia Pacific Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infection in Singapore, told The Daily Beast.

As far as COVID is concerned, Japan has done almost everything right. But that could change as the pandemic enters its third year and Japan, as well as the rest of the world, tries to keep up with an evolving virus and achieve some form of population-level "herd" immunity, where viral transmission is all but impossible.

"SARS-COV2 mutates quickly, and like the flu, there will always be viruses that escape immunity," Yamamoto said. "The acquisition of herd immunity will be established after immunity to some mutant strains has been acquired. It will take a year or two."

A year or two is plenty of time for something to go wrong.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Evictions rise after moratorium ends
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/street-evictions-rise-ban-ends-81768668
GIST	BOSTON -- Soon after losing his trucking job amid the pandemic, Freddie Davis got another blow: His landlord in Miami was almost doubling the rent on his Miami apartment.

Davis girded for what he feared would come next. In September he was evicted — just over a month after a federal eviction moratorium ended. He's now languishing in a hotel, aided by a nonprofit that helps homeless people.

The 51-year-old desperately wants to find a new apartment. But it's proving impossible on his \$1,000-a-month disability check.

“We live in America, and the thing is, people like me, we got to go to the street if we don’t have no other place to go because we can’t afford rent,” said Davis, who lost a leg to diabetes, suffers congestive heart failure and is recovering from multiple wounds on his other leg and foot. “I really can’t do nothing.”

The federal ban, along with a mix of state and federal moratoriums, is credited with keeping Davis and millions of others in their homes during the pandemic and preventing the spread of the coronavirus.

There was a brief lull in evictions filings after the ban ended. But housing advocates say they're on the rise in many parts of the country — though numbers remain below pre-pandemic levels due to the infusion of federal rental assistance and other pandemic-related assistance like expanded child tax credit payments that are also set to end.

Part of the increase is due to courts catching up on the backlog of eviction cases. But advocates say the upsurge also shows the limits of federal emergency rental assistance in places where distribution remains slow and tenant protections are weak. Rising housing prices in many markets also are playing a role.

According to the latest data from the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, eviction filings have been rising in most of the 31 cities and six states where it collects data. They increased 10.4% from the first half of August to the first half of September. In the first half of October, numbers were 38% above August levels and 25% higher than in September. Filings fell around 7% from the first half of October to November and now remain about 48% below pre-pandemic levels.

Among places where eviction filings are returning to normal are Connecticut as well as Houston, Indianapolis, and Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio, according to the Eviction Lab. Florida, too, has seen a significant rise, with filings in Tampa and Gainesville returning to near pre-pandemic levels.

"There was a batch of initial commentary coming out when the moratorium ended and the tone ... was, well, there wasn't a tsunami so we don't have an eviction crisis on our hands," said Ben Martin, senior researcher at Texas Housers, a nonprofit focused on housing issues.

“That initial narrative was somewhat misleading. What we are seeing is a reflection of reality, which is that evictions take time to work their way into and through the court system.”

Among the concerns is that some landlords who got federal assistance are still evicting tenants. A survey of nearly 120 attorneys nationwide from the National Housing Law Project found 86% had seen cases like this. They also saw increasing instances of landlords lying in court to evict tenants and illegally locking out tenants.

“In many states, landlord tenant law is antiquated and designed to provide results for landlords," said Shamus Roller, executive director of the National Housing Law Project. “Instead of adjudicating the facts, courts function as conveyor belts, moving tenants toward eviction.”

Among those who contend they were illegally evicted is Faye Moore. The 72-year-old returned home from work in October to find her life spread out on the sidewalk.

Behind several thousand dollars rent on her two-bedroom townhouse in an Atlanta suburb, Moore figured she would get the chance to present her case to a judge, including that management refused to take her rent money for months and that she was given no notice before she was evicted.

"I'm devastated. It was a house full of furniture. Everything," said Moore, a retired mental health therapist who is now staying in a hotel with her 61-year-old partner, Garry Betared. "It was like a storm came in and devastated everything. I can't find my important papers or anything."

Cicely Murray, a HUD housing counselor with the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America who is working with Moore, was most upset that the couple was evicted without a court hearing and forced to fend for themselves.

"I'm angry that anyone would put an elderly couple out without trying to figure out what resources are there," Murray said. "We are still in a pandemic. ... You are putting people in precarious situations who are some of the most fragile."

As Christmas approaches, there are plenty of signs that eviction cases will keep rising.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, those saying they weren't confident of paying next month's rent increased from about 5 million at the end of September to 6.3 million in the latest data.

Landlords, especially smaller ones who own a handful of apartments, have also struggled. They believed the moratorium was illegal and saddled them with months of back rent they may never get back. Others were forced to lay off maintenance staff or sell units as they awaited federal rental assistance that was slow to be distributed.

Some localities have lagged behind in getting out their portion of the \$46.5 billion in federal Emergency Rental Assistance. According to a November report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition, 28% of grantees — 32 states and 80 localities — spent less than 30% of their first allocation of money and risk losing those funds.

Among them is Nebraska, which spent only 6% of its funding through September and just 7% through October. Some landlords are refusing to take part in the program, said Caitlin Cedfeldt, a staff attorney at Legal Aid of Nebraska, while others have grown tired of waiting and are moving to evict. Tenants, some of whom got initial help but still face economic hardship, are being told they can't yet reapply for additional help.

Missouri only spent 18% of its funding through September but has since improved.

"We have so much more work to do," U.S. Rep. Cori Bush, a St. Louis Democrat, said, citing data showing that evictions during the pandemic "have taken lives."

There are some states and local governments that "feel, 'We don't want this money. We don't want this federal aid,'" she said. "And, we have some landlords who say that they don't want the money as well. So that makes it harder for the money to be dispersed."

Gene Sperling, who is charged with overseeing implementation of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package, said some increase in evictions was inevitable after the ban ended. "But fortunately because the Emergency Rental Assistance program is now paying full back-rent to about 500,000 renters each month, the eviction tsunami that experts feared has not occurred," he said.

On the flip side are states and cities running out of rental assistance. The Treasury Department expects that upwards of \$30 billion, or about two-thirds of the money, will have been spent or allocated by the end of the year. As the law dictates, Treasury is expected to begin reallocating funds from places not spending it to those in need.

Texas has stopped accepting new applicants because it has allocated all its funds, though it continues to process applications received before the deadline. Oregon has stopped taking new applicants for now.

The state of New York has spent or committed nearly all of its money, as has Philadelphia. California will soon exhaust its funds, while Atlanta has closed its program to new applicants. Austin, Texas, also stopped taking applications.

“It’s particularly concerning that a number of these programs are now shutting down because all funds have been expended or obligated,” said Peter Hepburn, research fellow at the Eviction Lab.

“If that funding gets removed, landlords may have less incentive to work with tenants.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 SKorea bans social gatherings of 5 or more
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/skorea-bans-gatherings-people-amid-virus-surge-81782621
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- South Korea will prohibit private social gatherings of five or more people nationwide and force restaurants to close at 9 p.m., rolling out the country's toughest coronavirus restrictions yet as hospitals grapple with the deadliest month of the pandemic.</p> <p>Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum said Thursday that the new measures will be enforced for at least 16 days after taking effect on Saturday, saying there’s an urgent need to bring the country to a “standstill” with the delta-driven surge overwhelming stretched hospitals and exhausted medical workers.</p> <p>Schools in the densely populated capital Seoul and nearby metropolitan areas, where the virus has hit hardest, will also go back to remote learning after fully reopening in November.</p> <p>The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency reported 7,622 new cases on Thursday, close to the daily record of 7,850 set a day earlier. That brought the national caseload to 544,117, with nearly 97,000 added in December alone.</p> <p>Most of the transmissions were in the capital region, where officials say more than 86% of intensive care units designated for COVID-19 treatment are already occupied amid a spike in hospitalizations and deaths.</p> <p>More than 890 virus patients died this month, bringing the country’s death toll to 4,518. As of Thursday morning, a record 989 patients were in serious or critical condition.</p> <p>“During this period of standstill, the government will reinforce the stability of our medical response capabilities,” said Kim, Seoul’s No. 2 behind President Moon Jae-in, during a virus meeting. “We ask our people to respond to these efforts by actively getting vaccinated.”</p> <p>The viral surge has been a huge setback for President Moon Jae-in's government, which had significantly eased social distancing rules in November while declaring a phased return to pre-pandemic normalcy.</p> <p>While focusing on improving the economy, officials had predicted that the country’s rising vaccination rates would keep hospitalizations and fatalities down. But there has been a surge in serious cases among people in their 60s or older, including those whose immunities have waned after getting inoculated early in the vaccine rollout that began in February.</p> <p>More than 81% of the population of over 51 million has been fully vaccinated, but only 17% of people have received booster shots.</p> <p>After hesitating for weeks, officials moderately tightened social distancing rules last week, banning gatherings of seven or more people in the Seoul metropolitan area and requiring adults to verify their vaccination status to use restaurants and other businesses, but such measures didn’t meaningfully slow the virus' spread.</p>

	<p>Jung Eun-kyeong, KDCA's commissioner, said the country could see daily infections exceed 10,000 or 20,000 in the coming weeks if it fails to meaningfully slow transmissions now. She said that would push the number of serious cases to between 1,600 and 1,900, possibly beyond what hospitals could handle without sacrificing their non-COVID-19 care.</p> <p>"We are seeing an average of 4,700 new cases in the Seoul metropolitan area, which is significantly higher than the maximum 3,600 level the hospital system could manage," Jung said during a briefing.</p> <p>Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol said the four-person gatherings limit will only be applied to fully vaccinated adults. Those who aren't fully vaccinated will be required to eat alone at restaurants, Kwon said. The rules won't be applied to children 18 years or younger. Restaurants, coffee shops, gyms and karaoke venues will be required to close at 9 p.m., while movie theaters, concert halls and private cram schools will have to close at 10 p.m.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Nations renew talks on 'killer robots'
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/nations-renew-talks-killer-robots-deal-hopes-narrow-81770575
GIST	<p>GENEVA -- The countries behind a United Nations agreement on weapons have been meeting this week on the thorny issue of lethal autonomous weapons systems, colloquially known as "killer robots," which advocacy groups want to strictly limit or ban.</p> <p>The latest conference of countries behind a Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons is tackling an array of issues from incendiary weapons, explosive remnants of war, a specific category of land mines, and the autonomous weapons systems.</p> <p>Opponents of such systems fear a dystopian day when tanks, submarines, robots or fleets of drones with facial-recognition software could roam without human oversight and strike against human targets.</p> <p>"It's essentially a really critical opportunity for states to take steps to regulate and prohibit autonomy in weapons systems, which in essence means killer robots or weapons systems that are going to operate without meaningful human control," said Clare Conboy, spokeswoman for the advocacy group Stop Killer Robots.</p> <p>The various countries have met repeatedly on the issue since 2013. They face what Human Rights Watch called a pivotal decision this week in Geneva on whether to open specific talks on the use of autonomous weapons systems or to leave it up to regular meetings of the countries to work out.</p> <p>A group of governmental experts that took up the issue failed to reach a consensus last week, and advocacy groups say nations including the United States, Russia, Israel, India and Britain have impeded progress.</p> <p>The International Committee of the Red Cross cautioned this month that the "loss of human control and judgment in the use of force and weapons raises serious concerns from humanitarian, legal and ethical perspectives."</p> <p>Some world powers oppose any binding or nonvoluntary constraints on the development of such systems, in part out of concern that if the countries can't develop or research such weapons, their enemies or non-state groups might. Some countries argue there's a fine line between autonomous weapons systems and computer-aided targeting and weapons systems that exist already.</p> <p>The United States has called for a "code of conduct" governing the use of such systems, while Russia has argued that current international law is sufficient.</p>

	<p>U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in a statement delivered on his behalf at Monday's meeting, urged the conference on CCW to "swiftly advance its work on autonomous weapons that can choose targets and kill people without human interference."</p> <p>He called for an agreement "on an ambitious plan for the future to establish restrictions on the use of certain types of autonomous weapons."</p> <p>The talks are scheduled to run through Friday.</p> <p>The issue is likely to remain with the group of governmental experts and not be elevated to special talks — with a view toward other U.N. agreements that restrict cluster munitions and land mines.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Ukraine urges EU sanctions on Russia
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/eu-hit-russia-sanctions-ukraine-attacked-81763708
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy urged European Union leaders on Wednesday to swiftly impose new sanctions on Russia before it invades his country, and warned that acting after any conflict would be far too late.</p> <p>Speaking to reporters in Brussels, Zelenskyy said Ukraine stands ready to enter into talks with Russia to ease tensions, but that Russian President Vladimir Putin does not so far appear willing to come to the table.</p> <p>The EU's 27 national leaders will weigh how best to prevent a Russian invasion at a summit on Thursday. A statement drafted for their meeting, seen by The Associated Press, warns that "any further military aggression against Ukraine will have massive consequences and severe cost in response."</p> <p>"For us, it is important to have sanctions applied before, rather than after, the conflict would happen, because if they were applied after the conflict would happen, this would basically make them meaningless," Zelenskyy said.</p> <p>"We have war going on for eight years. We understand that only if the sanctions are applied prior to the armed conflict would they become a prevention mechanism for any possible escalation," he said.</p> <p>U.S. intelligence officials say Russia has moved 70,000 troops toward Ukraine's border and is preparing for a possible invasion early next year. Moscow denies that it has any plans to attack Ukraine, but did so in 2014 when it annexed the Crimean Peninsula.</p> <p>Zelenskyy said he and some EU leaders discussed five options for responding to any Russian attack, but he provided no details. European officials argue that it's a better deterrent to keep Putin in the dark about what measures might be used against him.</p> <p>Earlier, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the EU has a battery of fresh sanctions ready if Moscow sends its troops across the border. Beyond scaling up existing sanctions, she said, the EU can adopt "unprecedented measures with serious consequences for Russia."</p> <p>Asked by reporters whether Europe would act on Zelenskyy's call, EU Council President Charles Michel said: "We have sanctions in place, we are ready to take additional sanctions if needed, and we will see" what happens.</p> <p>The U.S. and the EU have been coordinating their response to the Russian, but no real details of any sanctions have emerged. EU nations are divided between those in the east that think sanctions should be imposed immediately, and others like France and Germany who fear that could provoke an invasion.</p>

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz held a special meeting with Zelenskyy focused, at least in part, on how to revive the “Normandy format” involving their two countries plus Russia and Ukraine for talks aimed at ending the conflict.

So far, Moscow has refused pleas to return to the negotiating table.

Zelenskyy said Ukraine is open to negotiations of any kind, but that “what we are lacking is a willingness on the other side, on the Russian side, to engage in any kind of format or negotiations with us.”

France and Germany brokered a peace agreement in 2015 that helped end large-scale hostilities in eastern Ukraine, where Ukrainian forces have been fighting Russia-backed separatists since 2014. Still the conflict that has left 14,000 dead has simmered.

Scholz warned that more talks “must not be misunderstood as a new German ‘Ostpolitik,’” referring to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt’s policy of détente toward the communist Eastern bloc in the early 1970s.

There “can only be a European ‘Ostpolitik’ in a united Europe” that is based on principles of international law and order that Russia committed itself to but violated with the annexation of Crimea, he said.

Compounding the testy relations with Moscow, Germany decided Wednesday to expel two Russian diplomats after a court concluded that Moscow was behind the killing of a Chechen man in Berlin two years ago

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Deadly tornado outbreak by the numbers
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/deadly-tornado-outbreak-numbers/story?id=81742001
GIST	<p>The devastating twisters that tore through the South and the Midwest this weekend marked the deadliest tornado outbreak in the U.S. in a decade.</p> <p>88 lives lost At least 88 people were killed across five states: 74 in Kentucky; six in Illinois; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas; and two in Missouri.</p> <p>Victims' ages in Kentucky range from a 2-month-old to a 98-year-old. Twelve of the victims in Kentucky are children.</p> <p>This was the deadliest tornado outbreak in the U.S. since May 2011, when more than 170 people were killed.</p> <p>35 confirmed tornadoes, 44 reported tornadoes There were at least 44 reported tornadoes across nine states: Missouri, Illinois, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Indiana, Ohio and Alabama.</p> <p>Of those, 35 were confirmed tornadoes.</p> <p>128 miles A continuous tornado path -- at least an EF-4 -- spanned at least 128 miles across western Kentucky, according to preliminary survey results from the National Weather Service. The tornado had wind speeds of up to 190 mph and was at least 1 mile wide, NWS said.</p> <p>A second long-track tornado was on the ground for at least 71.6 miles across northwest Tennessee. This EF-3 tornado brought winds up to 160 mph and was more than a half-mile wide at times.</p> <p>Over 1,000 homes destroyed</p>

	<p>The storms ripped out entire blocks and Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said Sunday, "We're going to have over 1,000 homes that are just gone."</p> <p>"I don't think we'll have seen damage at this scale ever," he said.</p> <p>The governor, choking up, spoke about the destruction in Dawson Springs, a town of fewer than 3,000 residents where he said his father grew up. Beshear said his grandparents' home is still standing, but "one block up and left or right is just gone, just flattened."</p> <p>122 Kentuckians unaccounted for The governor said 122 Kentuckians were unaccounted for as of Tuesday afternoon.</p> <p>12,000 without power In Kentucky, approximately 12,000 customers were without power Wednesday evening.</p> <p>FEMA so far has provided Kentucky with 74,000 meals, 18,500 blankets and 1,500 tarps, White House principal deputy press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Wednesday.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Los Angeles port record volume imports
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/la-port-sees-record-2021-imports-supply-chain-81779704
GIST	<p>LOS ANGELES -- The Port of Los Angeles — the nation’s busiest — is on track to move a record volume of import cargo this year, even as officials struggle to thin a backup of ship traffic and ease supply chain snarls that have been blamed for product shortages and higher shelf prices.</p> <p>“The sustained and unmatched demand by the American consumer is pushing our import numbers to new levels,” Gene Seroka, executive director of the Port of Los Angeles, told reporters in an online briefing. “We’re on track for an all-time import record in ... 2021.”</p> <p>Cargo containers are moving off the docks faster, Seroka said, but even so nearly 100 ships were drifting near the port or its neighboring sister port in Long Beach, or headed toward them.</p> <p>Meanwhile, about two months after President Joe Biden announced a deal to establish around-the-clock operations at the Los Angeles port, only one of seven container terminals has met that goal. Part of the problem is establishing 24-hour operations is coordinating the various stops in the supply chain at overnight hours, including warehouse space and truck transportation.</p> <p>Seroka said the Los Angeles port expected to import about 5.5 million container units of cargo this year, a 13% jump over the previous record set in 2018. Despite a range of steps intended to speed up the flow of cargo, the November import total was down from 2020, in part because many of the ships that arrived were unscheduled and smaller in size.</p> <p>He said warehouse inventory is up about 2 points over the same time last year, and in-store inventories are only slightly behind 2020 levels for November.</p> <p>“Even with the strains on the supply chain, we continue to deliver record amounts of cargo,” he said. More needs to be done but “goods are making their way into the hands of consumers and manufacturers across the country.”</p> <p>Exports continued a long slide, with 33 of the last 37 months registering declines. Seroka attributed the drop in part to trade tensions with China under the Trump administration, a stronger dollar that makes U.S. products less competitive and the large number of empty containers leaving the port for Asia, which take up space that could otherwise be used by U.S. products.</p>

Seroka said the number of import containers on the docks lingering for nine or more days has dropped by 56%, since port officials threatened to impose fees for slow-moving cargo that sits on the docks.

Another challenge: Seroka said over 70,000 empty containers are sitting at terminals or port property, which can make it more difficult to move cargo to trucks and rail. He said port officials are urging shipping companies to clear out the backlog and, if necessary, the agency could consider financial penalties for companies that fail to do so.

Asked why the congested line-up of ships remain, despite efforts to improve operations, Seroka said, "The strength of the American consumer — American factories trying to improve output — just simply means more cargo is on its way."

And he indicated that snags in the supply chain, given its complexity, are likely to continue.

"It's almost like a game of Whac-a-Mole. We try to get after one issue and then two or three more pop up," he said.

[Return to Top](#)

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 'Cyber most dangerous weapon in world'
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/16/business/cyber-security-hacking-jpmorgan/index.html
GIST	<p>New York (CNN Business)Business leaders and former policymakers are sounding the cyber alarm.</p> <p>The JPMorgan International Council on Thursday urged the public and private sector to step up their cybersecurity efforts to combat an increasingly dangerous threat to the economy and national security.</p> <p>The council, which includes JPMorgan (JPM) CEO Jamie Dimon, Johnson & Johnson (JNJ) CEO Alex Gorsky and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, called for greater collaboration between the government and businesses, stepped-up intelligence sharing and tougher cybersecurity legislation.</p> <p>"Cyber is the most dangerous weapon in the world -- politically, economically and militarily," former Defense Secretary Bob Gates, the vice chairman of the JPMorgan International Council, said in the report, which was shared exclusively with CNN.</p> <p>Several high-profile hacks this year underscore the dangers posed by cyber vulnerabilities.</p> <p>Earlier this year, gasoline shortages emerged in the Southeast after a ransomware attack shut down the Colonial Pipeline, one of America's most vital pieces of energy infrastructure. Later, a cyberattack that infiltrated JBS forced the meat producer to shut down all beef production at facilities across the United States.</p> <p>In 2020, Russian hackers breached US federal agencies in an attack that compromised as many as 14 technology firms.</p> <p>"Cyber attacks in 2021 grew in number and sophistication, demonstrating that both state actors with vast resources as well as criminal groups have the capacity to threaten critical infrastructure and ultimately national security," the JPMorgan International Council wrote.</p> <p>The White House sent out a letter Thursday laying out steps business leaders can take to defend against cyber attacks this holiday season.</p> <p>"Unfortunately, malicious cyber actors are not taking a holiday -- and they can ruin ours if we're not prepared and protected," Biden cyber officials warned in the letter.</p>

The JPMorgan council, whose members also include former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, credited the Biden administration and Congress for an "enormous amount of work" aimed at tackling the cyber challenge.

Yet the JPMorgan council, which first met in 1967, also laid out "opportunities to amplify these efforts," including:

- Strengthening the collaboration between public and private sectors
- Ramping up the hiring of cybersecurity experts in government agencies
- Enhancing intelligence sharing among like-minded countries
- Defining and "enforcing norms of cyber behavior"
- Passing legislation to codify executive orders enacted by the Biden administration and prior administrations

"The public and private sectors must work together to fortify our business and government activities against this threat," Gates wrote, "and adequately educate the American people about just how dangerous this weapon is."

Business fears government is holding back on intel

The JPMorgan council called for governments to do more to bring cyber criminals to justice in a more timely manner. The report said this would "build greater trust and improve information sharing" between the public and private sectors.

"Cyber risk is of critical importance to countries, economies, and businesses," Dimon wrote in the report. "To help protect national security and overcome impediments to trade, we need to hold bad actors accountable, provide transparency to those affected by incidents, invest in the uplift to cybersecurity, and adopt safe and sound practices for data protection and handling."

The council argued that it's crucial that governments don't withhold what they know about cyber incidents and threats.

"There is a perception among some business leaders that the government is not sharing as much information as it could, which undermines trust and discourages businesses from sharing information in kind," the report said.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell warned Wednesday about how a widescale cyberattack could roil financial markets.

Asked during a press conference to identify risks to financial stability, Powell mentioned commonly cited threats such as a new Covid-19 variant and high market valuations. But then he expressed concern about how the Fed would respond to a major cyber event.

"The risk of a successful cyberattack ... would be very difficult to deal with," Powell said. "We know how to deal with bad loans and things like that. I think if a cyberattack that were to take down a major financial institution or financial market utility, that would be really significant financial stability risks that we haven't actually faced yet."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 'DarkWatchman' new fileless malware
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/new-fileless-malware-uses-windows.html
GIST	<p>A new JavaScript-based remote access Trojan (RAT) propagated via a social engineering campaign has been observed employing sneaky "fileless" techniques as part of its detection-evasion methods to elude discovery and analysis.</p> <p>Dubbed DarkWatchman by researchers from Prevailion's Adversarial Counterintelligence Team (PACT), the malware uses a resilient domain generation algorithm (DGA) to identify its command-and-control (C2)</p>

infrastructure and utilizes the Windows Registry for all of its storage operations, thereby enabling it to bypass antimalware engines.

The RAT "utilizes novel methods for fileless persistence, on-system activity, and dynamic run-time capabilities like self-updating and recompilation," researchers Matt Stafford and Sherman Smith [said](#), adding it "represents an evolution in fileless malware techniques, as it uses the registry for nearly all temporary and permanent storage and therefore never writes anything to disk, allowing it to operate beneath or around the detection threshold of most security tools."

Prevailion said that an unnamed enterprise-sized organization in Russia was one among the targeted victims, with a number of malware artifacts identified starting November 12, 2021. Given its backdoor and persistence features, the PACT team assessed that DarkWatchman could be initial access and reconnaissance tool for use by ransomware groups.

An interesting consequence of this novel development is that it completely obviates the need for ransomware operators to recruit affiliates, who are typically in charge of dropping the file-locking malware and handling the file exfiltration. Using DarkWatchman as a prelude for ransomware deployments also equips the core developers of the ransomware with better oversight over the operation beyond negotiating ransoms.

Distributed via spear-phishing emails that masquerade as "Free storage expiration notification" for a consignment delivered by Russian shipment company Pony Express, DarkWatchman provides a stealthy gateway for further malicious activity. The emails come attached with a purported invoice in the form of a ZIP archive that, in turn, contains the payload necessary to infect the Windows system.

The novel RAT is both a fileless JavaScript RAT and a C#-based keylogger, the latter of which is stored in the registry to avoid detection. Both the components are also extremely lightweight. The malicious JavaScript code just takes about 32kb, while the keylogger barely registers at 8.5kb.

"The storage of the binary in the registry as encoded text means that DarkWatchman is persistent yet its executable is never (permanently) written to disk; it also means that DarkWatchman's operators can update (or replace) the malware every time it's executed," the researchers said.

Once installed, DarkWatchman can execute arbitrary binaries, load DLL files, run JavaScript code and PowerShell commands, upload files to a remote server, update itself, and even uninstall the RAT and keylogger from the compromised machine. The JavaScript routine is also responsible for establishing persistence by creating a scheduled task that runs the malware at every user log on.

"The keylogger itself does not communicate with the C2 or write to disk," the researchers said. "Instead, it writes its keylog to a registry key that it uses as a buffer. During its operation, the RAT scrapes and clears this buffer before transmitting the logged keystrokes to the C2 server."

DarkWatchman has yet to be attributed to a hacking group, but Prevailion characterized the crew as a "capable threat actor," alongside pointing out the malware's exclusive targeting of victims located in Russia and the typographical errors and misspellings that were identified in the source code samples, raising the possibility that the operators may not be native English speakers.

"It would appear that the authors of DarkWatchman identified and took advantage of the complexity and opacity of the Windows Registry to work underneath or around the detection threshold of security tools and analysts alike," the researchers concluded. "Registry changes are commonplace, and it can be difficult to identify which changes are anomalous or outside the scope of normal OS and software functions."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 FBI recovers stolen Oregon patient data
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/fbi-recovers-oregonians-stolen/

GIST	<p>Patient data stolen from an Oregon healthcare provider during a cyber-attack has been recovered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).</p> <p>The personal health information (PHI) of approximately 750,000 patients of Oregon Anesthesiology Group (OAG) was compromised in the summer.</p> <p>Cyber-criminals gained access to the group's IT system on July 11 and deployed ransomware that encrypted the contents of certain files. As a result of the attack, staff at the healthcare provider could not access patients' data or the group's servers.</p> <p>OAG hired a digital forensics firm to investigate the attack. The cybersecurity experts determined that the attackers had accessed data belonging to 522 current and former employees, as well as sensitive information belonging to patients.</p> <p>Areas of the network impacted by the attack contained files in which names, addresses, dates of service, diagnosis and procedure codes and descriptions, medical record numbers, insurance provider names and insurance ID numbers were stored.</p> <p>Employee data that could have been compromised included names, addresses, Social Security numbers, and additional information declared in W-2 tax forms.</p> <p>Following the attack, the group restored its systems from off-site backups and rebuilt its IT infrastructure from the ground up. In the fall, the FBI contacted the healthcare provider, with OAG sharing information on how the cybercrime was executed.</p> <p>"On October 21, the FBI notified OAG that it had seized an account belonging to HelloKitty, a Ukrainian hacking group, which contained OAG patient and employee files," stated the group in a data breach notice issued earlier this month.</p> <p>"The FBI believes HelloKitty exploited a vulnerability in our third-party firewall, enabling the hackers to gain entry to the network."</p> <p>A cyber forensics report obtained by OAG in late November stated that the cyber-criminals used their access to the healthcare provider's IT system to data-mine the administrator's credentials and access OAG's encrypted data.</p> <p>Since the attack, OAG has replaced its third-party firewall and expanded multi-factor authentication. The group has also engaged a third-party vendor to provide around-the-clock real-time security monitoring with live response, advice on security system architecture, and additional compartmentalization of sensitive data.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Social media threats to Seattle high schools
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/police-investigating-social-media-threats-at-2-seattle-high-schools/
GIST	<p>Police said officers are investigating social media threats directed at two South Seattle high schools that closed one on Wednesday and forced the other to shelter in place.</p> <p>Seattle Public Schools staff reported a social media threat involving students at Franklin High School and a potential threat at Rainier Beach High School, police said.</p> <p>"The nature of the specific threat at Franklin led school officials to close the campus for the day," according to the Seattle Police Department blotter. "Rainier Beach did not receive any specific threats and continued the school day sheltered in place."</p>

	<p>Police said additional patrols will be provided at schools as needed.</p> <p>Seattle police have recently investigated several other online threats at local schools.</p> <p>Students have recently been arrested in connection with separate cases at Ingraham High School and Whitman Middle School, police said.</p> <p>Police are also investigating a recent shooting after school hours outside Garfield High School.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Experts: breach victims freeze credit
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/experts-breach-victims-freeze/
GIST	<p>Only 3% of victims have frozen their credit after receiving a breach notice, despite it being the most effective way to prevent fraudsters from opening new accounts in their name, according to new research.</p> <p>Suspecting consumers aren't making the most of the facility, the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC) polled over 1000 US consumers on the topic.</p> <p>Less than a third had frozen their credit at one time for any reason, dropping into the low single digits for breach victims. Yet over three-quarters claimed to be familiar with the process.</p> <p>Despite broad awareness of credit freezing, consumers are often misinformed about the details. The ITRC claimed 11% incorrectly believe it will impact their credit score or require payment to freeze or thaw, and have therefore never done so.</p> <p>Most respondents said they didn't think they needed to.</p> <p>Freezing credit prevents lenders from obtaining a credit report about an individual, meaning they can't open any new lines of credit, nor can fraudsters use their stolen identity information. It can be done free of charge in just minutes and is widely regarded as more useful than the credit monitoring checks often offered to customers by breached organizations.</p> <p>The ITRC called for changes to the law so that all breach notifications include an explicit recommendation for the victim to freeze their credit and info stating that credit monitoring alone is not sufficient to prevent new accounts from being fraudulently created.</p> <p>It also called on businesses, victim advocates and government representatives to collaborate on a new awareness-raising campaign, emphasizing the importance of freezing the credit of children's accounts when their data has been stolen.</p> <p>One-third of respondents to the poll said they didn't think it was necessary to freeze their children's credit to prevent identity misuse.</p> <p>Finally, the ITRC wants the credit reporting industry to streamline freeze requests, so individuals do not need to lodge requests with each individual agency, as they have to at present.</p> <p>"The vast majority of people know what a credit freeze is but do not take advantage of this valuable resource," argued ITRC CEO, Eva Velasquez.</p> <p>"A credit freeze is generally considered the most effective tool to prevent new accounts from being opened in your name. This research shows that there needs to be improved awareness and utilization of credit freezes, particularly for children."</p> <p>This year is on track to be a record-breaker regarding the number of publicly disclosed breaches in the US.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Undetected credit card skimming attacks
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/sites-hacked-with-credit-card-stealers-undetected-for-months/
GIST	<p>Threat actors are gearing up for the holidays with credit card skimming attacks remaining undetected for months as payment information is stolen from customers.</p> <p>Magecart skimming is an attack that involves the injection of malicious JavaScript code on a target website, which runs when the visitor is at the checkout page.</p> <p>The code can steal payment details such as credit card number, holder name, addresses, and CVV, and send them to the actor.</p> <p>Threat actors may then use this information for purchasing goods online or sold to other actors on underground forums and dark web marketplaces known as "carding" sites.</p> <p>The SCUF connection</p> <p>In October 2021, Akamai researchers discovered a Magecart attack on SCUF Gaming International, a leading manufacturer of custom PC and console controllers, which resulted in the compromise of the financial details of 32,000 people.</p> <p>By investigating deeper, the analysts found that the same actor responsible for the attack against SCUF was operating an extensive network of skimmers that stole credit card details from several sites.</p> <p>These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whitemountainshoes.com – Shoes and footwear (Alexa rank: 425k) • goldboutique.com – Jewelry (Alexa rank: 1.4 M) • nafnaf.com – Fashion apparel (Alexa rank: 85k) • schlafstaette.de – Sleep products • proaudiostar.com – Professional audio equipment (Alexa rank: 150k) • truebrands.com – Professional beverage accessories (Alexa rank: 113k) • loudmouth.com – Clothing and special apparel (Alexa rank: 1.2 M) <p>The smaller the Alexa rank number, the more traffic that website receives, so the longer the skimmer stays undetected, the more credit card details Magecart actors steal.</p> <p>As such, actors limit the activity on their scripts to only valuable pages to keep their skimmers hidden on infected sites, making Akamai's investigation harder.</p> <p>"We found that the skimmer's command and control (C2) server responds with clean code when running on non-sensitive pages...", explains Akamai's report.</p> <p>"...and (the skimmer) only sends the malicious code if it runs on checkout pages, where credit card information can be found."</p> <p>Another anti-detection technique followed by Magecart actors is registering a new skimming domain for each targeted website.</p> <p>If their skimming operation is exposed/discovered, they deactivate that domain and continue the malicious activities on the other sites.</p> <p>In this particular case, the actors used the same C2 domain for four websites, so a small cluster was unveiled almost at once.</p> <p>Vigilance advised during Christmas</p>

	<p>Consumers who indulge in online shopping are advised to be extra cautious during Christmas when Magecart actors increase their efforts.</p> <p>Detecting skimmers is the responsibility of e-commerce site owners, not their visitors, so the latter can instead do the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use an up to date internet security solution • Prefer paying with electronic methods instead of cards • Use one-time "virtual" card solutions • Pay with cash on delivery if possible <p>If you have bought anything using your credit card from the seven websites listed above this year, consider your payment details compromised and call your bank to request a card replacement.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 AWS down again; impact online services
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/technology/aws-down-again-outage-impacts-twitch-zoom-psn-hulu-others/
GIST	<p>Amazon AWS is experiencing an outage that has impacted numerous online services, including Twitch, Zoom, PSN, Xbox Live, Doordash, Quickbooks Online, and Hulu.</p> <p>This ongoing outage started at approximately 7:43 AM PST and affects the US-WEST-1 and US-WEST-2 regions according to AWS' status page.</p> <p>According to reports [1, 2, 3], it has caused major Internet connectivity issues, taking down a long list of online platforms and websites.</p> <p>AWS engineers are working on addressing the root cause behind this outage and said they have already taken steps to restore connectivity.</p> <p>"We have identified the root cause of the Internet connectivity to the US-WEST-2 Region and have taken steps to restore connectivity," the AWS status page reads.</p> <p>"We have seen some improvement to Internet connectivity in the last few minutes but continue to work towards full recovery."</p> <p>This comes one week after another massive AWS outage affecting the US-EAST-1 Region which provides connectivity for people and companies across the northeastern part of the United States.</p> <p>As a result, streaming through Netflix, Roku, and Amazon Prime was immediately impacted. Ring devices were also brought down and became unreachable, according to users reporting that they could no longer connect to their cameras.</p> <p>Amazon delivery employees also said they couldn't access internal apps required to scan packages, access delivery routes, or see any upcoming schedules.</p> <p>As AWS later explained, that incident was caused by an "automated activity to scale capacity of one of the AWS services hosted in the main AWS network" which "resulted in a large surge of connection activity that overwhelmed the networking devices between the internal network and the main AWS network."</p> <p>These outages are not unique events since they follow multiple other similar incidents since 2011, including a large-scale incident that affected the US-EAST-1 Region in November 2020.</p> <p>At the time, a large number of sites and online platforms went offline after Amazon's Kinesis service for real-time processing of streaming data started experiencing issues.</p>

	<p>One year before, in September 2019, a power outage that hit the AWS' North Virginia US-EAST-1 data center led to data loss for all Amazon customers who didn't have working backups to restore their files.</p> <p><i>Update December 15, 11:27 EST:</i> AWS says the issue behind the outage affecting US-WEST-1 and US-WEST-2 regions has been resolved.</p> <p><i>We have resolved the issue affecting Internet connectivity to the US-WEST-1 Region. Connectivity within the region was not affected by this event. The issue has been resolved and the service is operating normally.</i></p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Large phishing study delivers surprises
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/large-scale-phishing-study-shows-who-bites-the-bait-more-often/
GIST	<p>A large-scale phishing study involving 14,733 participants over a 15-month experiment has produced some surprising findings that contradict previous research results that formed the basis for popular industry practices.</p> <p>The study was conducted by researchers at ETH Zurich in collaboration with an unnamed company that did not inform the participants about the simulated phishing program.</p> <p>To conduct the test, the researchers sent fake phishing emails to participants' regular work email and deployed an email client button that allowed them to report suspicious emails easily.</p> <p>The four goals of the study were to determine:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which employees fall for phishing 2. How vulnerability evolves over time 3. How effective embedded training and warnings are 4. Whether employees can do anything to help in phishing detection. <p>Gender is irrelevant</p> <p>The demographics were diverse and allowed the researchers to look into an element presented as a crucial susceptibility determining factor.</p> <p>One finding that contradicts existing studies is that gender does not correlate with phishing susceptibility. Instead, the study found that younger and older people are more prone to clicking on phishing links, so age is a key factor.</p> <p>Moreover, those who use specialized software for repetitive tasks are more likely to fall for phishing traps compared to those who do not need computers for their day-to-day jobs.</p> <p>Repeated clickers</p> <p>The so-called "repeated clickers" highlighted in previous research also appear here with 30.62% of those who opened a simulated phishing email, clicked on additional emails. Furthermore, 23.91% of those performing a dangerous action (enabling macros, submitting credentials), did it more than once.</p> <p>An interesting finding in the ETH study is that employees who are continuously exposed to phishing eventually fall for it, as 32.1% of the study participants clicked on at least one dangerous link or attachment.</p> <p>This finding underlines the importance of having effective email security and anti-phishing filters in place, as constant exposure leads to numbness and risky actions even by resilient employees.</p> <p>Training is overrated</p>

Warnings on suspicious emails were found to be effective, but this effectiveness didn't grow as the warning messages got more detailed, which is a new finding.

One finding that goes against commonly used security practices is that the researchers found that voluntary embedded training in simulated phishing exercises is ineffective.

"Interestingly, contradicting prior research results and a common industry practice, we found that the combination of simulated phishing exercises and voluntary embedded training (i.e., employees were not required to complete the training) not only failed to improve employee's phishing resilience, but it actually even made employees more susceptible to phishing" explains the [research paper](#).

Crowd-sourcing is feasible

Employees in the tested company were given a 'Report Phishing' button on their email client to report suspicious messages.

The study found that 90% of the employees reported six or fewer suspicious emails, but some remained very active throughout the experiment.

As such, the researchers conclude that there is no "reporting fatigue," suggesting that crowd-sourcing anti-phishing data is feasible.

In terms of the effectiveness of such a system, the analysts looked into reaction time and flagging accuracy.

The user reports were accurate in 68% for phishing and 79% if spam is accounted for as well, while the most prolific reporters reached an accuracy of over 80%.

The time for these reports to be submitted after reception is 5 minutes for 10% of the total volume and half an hour for 35% of the total number of reports.

"To apply these numbers to a hypothetical company of 1,000 employees where 100 of them are targeted by a phishing campaign, we would have between 8 and 25 reports of the email by employees—of which one within 5 minutes with high probability, and a larger number within 30 minutes," details the paper.

These findings show that utilizing a corporate-wide crowd-sourced phishing detection service could significantly reduce the threat of phishing attacks.

It is also important to note that such a system wouldn't produce a sizable operational workload as a result, so a corporation implementing crowd sourced phishing protection wouldn't incur much additional burden.

Of course, phishing is a complicated topic involving many crucial factors beyond the scope of studies like this one, so these findings cannot be considered concrete evidence of good or bad practices or universally applicable rules.

However, considering the central role that phishing continues to play in the entire spectrum of modern cyber-attacks, one owes to build upon these findings by experimenting further to develop more effective anti-phishing measures.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Emotet resumes Cobalt Strike installs
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/emotet-starts-dropping-cobalt-strike-again-for-faster-attacks/
GIST	Right in time for the holidays, the notorious Emotet malware is once again directly installing Cobalt Strike beacons for rapid cyberattacks.

For those not familiar with Emotet, it is considered one of the most widespread malware infections and is distributed through phishing emails that include malicious attachments.

Historically, once a device becomes infected, Emotet will steal a victim's email to use in future campaigns and then drops malware payloads, such as TrickBot and Qbot.

However, earlier this month, Emotet began to test [installing Cobalt Strike beacons](#) on infected devices instead of their regular payloads.

Cobalt Strike is a legitimate pentesting tool that threat actors commonly use to spread laterally through an organization and ultimately deploy ransomware on a network.

This test was brief, and the threat actors soon went back to distributing their typical payloads.

Emotet resumes Cobalt Strike installs

Last week, the Emotet threat actors suspended their phishing campaigns, and since then, researchers have not seen any further activity from the group.

"Spamming stopped last week on Thursday, and since then, they have been quiet with very little of ANYTHING going on until today." [Joseph Roosen](#) of the Cryptolaemus Emotet group told BleepingComputer.

However, Cryptolaemus is now warning that starting today, the threat actors have once again begun installing Cobalt Strike beacons to devices already infected by Emotet.

Roosen told BleepingComputer that Emotet is now downloading the Cobalt Strike modules directly from its command and control server and then executing them on the infected device.

With Cobalt Strike beacons directly installed by Emotet, threat actors who use them to spread laterally through a network, steal files, and deploy malware will have immediate access to compromised networks.

This access will speed up the delivery of attacks, and with it being right before the holidays, it could lead to numerous breaches since enterprises now have limited staff to monitor for and respond to attacks.

The rapid deployment of Cobalt Strike through Emotet is a significant development that should be on the radars of all Windows and network admins and security professionals.

With this increased distribution of beacons to already infected devices, it is anticipated that we will see an increased number of corporate breaches and ultimately ransomware attacks right before or during the holidays.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Original fix Log4j flaw fails to fully protect
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/application-security/original-fix-for-log4j-flaw-fails-to-fully-protect-against-dos-attacks-data-theft
GIST	<p>Security experts are now urging organizations to quickly update to a new version of the Log4j logging framework that the Apache Foundation released Tuesday because its original fix for a critical remote-code execution flaw in the logging tool does not adequately protect against attacks in some situations.</p> <p>According to the Apache Foundation, the Apache Log4j 2.15.0 version that it released last week to address the Log4j flaw (CVE-2021-44228) is "incomplete in certain non-default configurations" and gives threat actors a way to trigger a denial-of-service (DoS) attack on vulnerable systems.</p>

"Note that previous mitigations involving configuration such as setting the system property log4j2.noFormatMsgLookup to true do NOT mitigate this specific vulnerability," the Apache Foundation said.

The foundation assigned a new vulnerability identifier ([CVE 2021-45046](#)) for the issue and pushed out a fresh version (Apache Log4j 2.16.0) of the tool that it said [addresses the DoS issue](#).

Meanwhile, security vendor Praetorian, among the first to exploit the Log4j flaw last Friday, today said the Log4j 2.15.0 version from last week was vulnerable to another issue as well: exfiltration of data under certain conditions.

Praetorian did not share the technical details of the research and said that the company had passed on its finding to the Apache Foundation.

"In the interim, we strongly recommend that customers upgrade to 2.16.0 as quickly as possible," said Praetorian CEO Nathan Sportsman in a [blog](#) posted this afternoon.

Anthony Weems, principal researcher at Praetorian, says the Apache Foundation's description about the Log4j 2.15.0 version restricting JNDI LDAP lookups to localhost by default is incorrect.

"We have a bypass for this localhost restriction that means that when a host is affected by CVE-2021-45046, you can exfiltrate [environment variables] via DNS," Weems says.

The new developments mean that organizations that already downloaded Log4j 2.15.0 to address the original flaw (CVE-2021-44228) now will need to implement version 2.16.0 to mitigate the DoS issue tied to CVE-2021-4506.

"If someone owned a network or application and found the need to patch Log4j to 2.15, they will need to update to 2.16 now," says Vikram Thakur, technical director at Symantec, a division of Broadcom Software.

Security experts have described the flaw in Log4j as one of the worst ever in recent memory because of its broad scope and ease of exploitability. Almost all Java applications use the logging tool, meaning that the vulnerability is present almost everywhere a Java app is used.

"It is frequently included as a default log handler in enterprise Java applications and is commonly included as a dependency component in other Java projects (including in over [470,000 other open source projects](#))," [ShadowServer said](#) this week. The logging tool is present in almost all software-as-a-service and cloud-service provider environments, as well as in both Internet-facing and internal systems.

An analysis by Sonatype earlier this week showed more than 28.6 million downloads of Log4j in the past four months.

Growing Attack Activity

Attackers — including a growing number of advanced persistent threat groups from Iran, North Korea, and Turkey — have predictably been attempting to exploit the flaw right from the moment it was first disclosed. [Microsoft](#) on Tuesday said its researchers had observed Iranian threat actor Phosphorous acquiring an exploit for Log4j and making modifications to it presumably in preparation for attacks targeting the flaw. Hafnium, the China-based group behind numerous zero-day attacks on the ProxyLogon set of flaws in Exchange Server, has begun using the Log4j to target virtualization infrastructure, Microsoft said.

Others have described threat actors targeting the flaw to try and distribute cryptocurrency coin miners, remote access Trojans, ransomware, and web shells for future exploitation.

	<p>Edge cloud services provider Fastly, which has been tracking the threat, on Wednesday said it had observed attackers targeting the flaw on a huge scale. Many have begun figuring out ways to try and evade mitigations for the flaw. As an example, Fastly pointed to attackers using nested statements to make it harder for defenders to create simple rules for detecting an attack. There has also been a growing number of attacks where threat actors attempt to extract data, such as AWS access keys, AWS session tokens, and OS version details. In fact, 35% of the attacks that Fastly observed involved attempts to steal data.</p> <p>"The nested templates used in Log4j attacks allow for attackers to both obfuscate the strings included as well as try to steal information," says Mike Benjamin, vice president of security research at Fastly.</p> <p>The obfuscation makes it more difficult for defenders to block or alert without false positives, he says.</p> <p>"For the theft of information, defenders need to be mindful of any environment variables or other information available to the Java runtime that could be stolen by an attacker," Benjamin explains.</p> <p>Fastly also found that 91% of unique callbacks — or responses from vulnerable machines to attacker scans — pointed back to four sites that are largely associated with well-known security tools sometimes used for legitimate purposes, such as pen testing.</p> <p>"Penetration testers and bug-bounty researchers often make use of these tools to make out-of-band callbacks," Benjamin says. "They become an easy place to deliver payloads and test against potentially vulnerable services."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 UK web app attacks surge 251% in 2yrs
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/web-app-attacks-surge-251-in-two/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Web application attacks on UK businesses have soared by over 250% since October 2019, driving a surge in data breaches, according to Imperva.</p> <p>The security vendor analyzed nearly 4.7 million web application-related cybersecurity incidents over the period to find that attacks are increasing, on average, by 22% each quarter.</p> <p>This is likely to be fuelling a vast increase in data breaches. Remote code execution (RCE) and remote file inclusion (RFI) attacks, often used to steal information and hijack websites, surged by 271% over the two years.</p> <p>In fact, previous research from Imperva Research Labs found that half (50%) of all data breaches begin with web applications. The research estimated that around 20 billion compromised records would stem from web app attacks this year.</p> <p>More concerning still is that recorded web app attacks increased by 68% from Q2 to Q3 2021, as threat actors sought to flood underground sites with stolen data ahead of the Christmas shopping period.</p> <p>Fraudsters often use busy shopping times to disguise their activity, as retailers sometimes relax their checks to process larger sales volumes.</p> <p>"The pandemic placed immense urgency on businesses to get all kinds of digital transformation projects live as quickly as possible, and that is almost certainly a driving factor behind this surge in attacks," said Peter Klimek, director of technology at Imperva.</p> <p>"The changing nature of application development itself is also hugely significant. Developments like the rapid proliferation of APIs and the shift to cloud-native computing is beneficial from a DevOps standpoint, but for security teams, these changes in application architecture and the accompanying increased attack surface is making their jobs much harder."</p>

	According to official figures , fraud costs UK businesses and consumers an estimated £1.3bn in the first half of 2021, a three-fold year-on-year increase.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Third flaw Log4j vulnerability emerges
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/hackers-begin-exploiting-second-log4j.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Web infrastructure company Cloudflare on Wednesday revealed that threat actors are actively attempting to exploit a second bug disclosed in the widely used Log4j logging utility, making it imperative that customers move quickly to install the latest version as a barrage of attacks continues to pummel unpatched systems with a variety of malware.</p> <p>The new vulnerability, assigned the identifier CVE-2021-45046, makes it possible for adversaries to carry out denial-of-service (DoS) attacks and follows disclosure from the Apache Software Foundation (ASF) that the original fix for the remote code execution bug — CVE-2021-44228 aka Log4Shell — was "incomplete in certain non-default configurations." The issue has since been addressed in Log4j version 2.16.0.</p> <p>"This vulnerability is actively being exploited and anyone using Log4J should update to version 2.16.0 as soon as possible, even if you have previously updated to 2.15.0," Cloudflare's Andre Bluehs and Gabriel Gabor said.</p> <p>Even more troublingly, researchers at security firm Praetorian warned of a third separate security weakness in Log4j version 2.15.0 that can "allow for exfiltration of sensitive data in certain circumstances." Additional technical details of the flaw have been withheld to prevent further exploitation, but it's not immediately clear if this has been already addressed in version 2.16.0.</p> <p>The latest development comes as advanced persistent threat groups from China, Iran, North Korea, and Turkey, counting the likes of Hafnium and Phosphorus, have jumped into the fray to operationalize the vulnerability and discover and continue exploiting as many susceptible systems as possible for follow-on attacks. Over 1.8 million attempts to exploit the Log4j vulnerability have been recorded to date.</p> <p>Microsoft Threat Intelligence Center (MSTIC) said it also observed access brokers leveraging the Log4Shell flaw to gain initial access to target networks that were then sold to other ransomware affiliates.</p> <p>In addition, dozens of malware families that run the gamut from cryptocurrency coin miners and remote access trojans to botnets and web shells have been identified taking advantage of this shortcoming to date.</p> <p>While it's common for threat actors to make efforts to exploit newly disclosed vulnerabilities before they're remediated, the Log4j flaw underscores the risks arising from software supply chains when a key piece of software is used within a broad range of products across several vendors and deployed by their customers around the world.</p> <p>"This cross-cutting vulnerability, which is vendor-agnostic and affects both proprietary and open-source software, will leave a wide swathe of industries exposed to remote exploitation, including electric power, water, food and beverage, manufacturing, transportation, and more," industrial cybersecurity firm Dragos noted.</p> <p>"As network defenders close off more simplistic exploit paths and advanced adversaries incorporate the vulnerability in their attacks, more sophisticated variations of Log4j exploits will emerge with a higher likelihood of directly impacting Operational Technology networks," the company added.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 NCSC last minute seasonal scam warning
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/government-experts-seasonal-scam/?&web_view=true

GIST	<p>The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has made one final plea to consumers ahead of the busiest shopping weekend before Christmas to be alert to fraud and data theft attempts.</p> <p>The GCHQ agency urged shoppers to protect their devices, be aware of unsolicited messages and minimize the amount of information they input into e-commerce sites.</p> <p>According to banking body UK Finance, nearly £22bn was spent online on Christmas shopping last year due to COVID-19: over a third (34%) of all card spending in December. With the Omicron variant surging, 2021 will likely witness a repeat show, exposing more consumers to online scams.</p> <p>These can take many forms, including phishing emails containing fake shipping notifications and warnings about compromised accounts or fake gift cards requiring the recipient to share personal information to ‘redeem’ them.</p> <p>Consumers may also be approached online via emails and social media messages with “too good to be true” offers for discounted popular gift items, including electronics. If they fall for these, the victims not only lose the money spent on the non-existent item, but their bank or card details will also end up in the hands of the threat actors.</p> <p>The NCSC said the last-minute rush to buy presents online before the Christmas delivery deadline peaks this Saturday, making many shoppers more vulnerable to such scams.</p> <p>“The good news is that there are common signs of a scam that people can look for, for example offers that seem too good to be true or claim that particular items are in short supply,” said NCSC director for policy and communications, Nicola Hudson.</p> <p>“To protect themselves, there are practical steps people can take, from setting a strong password on accounts to researching a brand before buying – much more can be found on this on the NCSC’s website.”</p> <p>The NCSC urged consumers to use strong, unique passwords and two-factor authentication for all accounts, especially email, banking and payment services.</p> <p>It advised shoppers to ignore unsolicited messages, especially ones with links to websites, and to pay via credit card as purchases should be protected this way. The agency also recommended that shoppers check out as a “guest” to avoid spending too many personal details with e-commerce firms.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 FBI accidentally reveals cybergang location
SOURCE	https://securityaffairs.co/wordpress/125675/cyber-crime/hellokitty-ransomware-ukraine.html?web_view=true
GIST	<p>While investigating a data breach suffered by a healthcare organization, FBI accidentally revealed that it believes that the HelloKitty ransomware gang operates out of Ukraine.</p> <p>The investigation conducted by FBI on a recent data breach suffered by an Oregon healthcare organization lead to the accidental revelation that the FBI believes that the HelloKitty ransomware gang (Five Hands) operates out of Ukraine.</p> <p><i>“Oregon Anesthesiology Group, P.C. (OAG) experienced a cyberattack on July 11, after which we were briefly locked out of our servers.” reads the notice of data breach published by the Oregon Anesthesiology Group. “On October 21, the FBI notified OAG that it had seized an account belonging to HelloKitty, a Ukrainian hacking group, which contained OAG patient and employee files. The FBI believes HelloKitty exploited a vulnerability in our third-party firewall, enabling the hackers to gain entry to the network.”</i></p> <p>The HelloKitty gang has been active since January 2021 and it is still active. In November, the US FBI has published a flash alert warning private organizations of the evolution of the HelloKitty ransomware (aka</p>

	<p>FiveHands). According to the alert, the ransomware gang is launching distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks as part of its extortion activities.</p> <p>The ransomware gang targets their victims' websites with DDoS attacks if they refuse to pay the ransom. The HelloKitty ransomware group, like other ransomware gangs, implements a double extortion model, stealing sensitive documents from victims before encrypting them. Then the threat actors threaten to leak the stolen data to force the victim into paying the ransom.</p> <p>The HelloKitty/FiveHands gang is known to demand varying ransom payments in Bitcoin (BTC) that are commensurate with the economic capabilities of the victims.</p> <p>The group's operators use several techniques to breach the targets' networks, such as exploiting SonicWall flaws (e.g., CVE-2021-20016, CVE-2021-20021, CVE-2021-20022, CVE-2021-2002) or using compromised credentials.</p> <p>In May, US CISA also published an analysis report (AR21-126A) on the FiveHands ransomware, anyway US authorities never disclosed the possible location of the gang.</p> <p>The accidental revelation can now suggest the gang temporarily suspend its operations moving its activities to another country where local police will be more indulgent.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/16 Australia, US sign Cloud Act deal
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/dec/16/australia-and-us-sign-cloud-act-deal-to-help-law-enforcement-agencies-demand-data-from-tech-giants
GIST	<p>Australia and the US have signed a deal to speed up information sharing about criminal suspects between law enforcement agencies and tech companies, including social media giants.</p> <p>The deal under the US Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data (Cloud) Act will allow Australian and US law enforcement agencies to use existing warrants to demand information from overseas-based companies to prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute serious crime.</p> <p>The agreement allows authorities to demand data from communications service providers operating in the other's jurisdiction, reducing the time taken to obtain information.</p> <p>It means companies including email providers, telcos, social media platforms, and cloud storage services could soon find themselves answering warrants from law enforcement agencies based in the US or Australia rather than their home jurisdiction.</p> <p>Questions remain about the practical effects of the deal, given the drive towards encryption of information that keeps data at arm's length from the tech companies themselves, such as Facebook's provision of end-to-end encryption for its users on WhatsApp.</p> <p>In October 2019 the former home affairs minister, Peter Dutton, publicly lobbied Facebook not to roll out encryption, which he said would put users' messages out of reach of police "even with a court-ordered warrant".</p> <p>Facebook responded that people "have the right to have a private conversation online" and the Cloud Act "allows for companies to provide available information when they receive valid legal requests [but] does not require companies to build backdoors".</p> <p>The home affairs minister, Karen Andrews, said the Cloud Act agreement included "important safeguards" reflecting the two countries' "respect for the rule of law and for human rights".</p>

“As we saw in Operation Ironside ... the Australian federal police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are already capable of smashing serious, organised crime networks using sophisticated digital techniques,” Andrews said in a statement.

“This agreement brings that partnership to new heights.”

The US attorney general, Merrick Garland, said the deal would ensure “more efficient cross-border transfers of data ... so that our governments can more effectively counter serious crime, including terrorism, while adhering to the privacy and civil liberties values that we both share”.

Andrews, who is in Washington, flagged that she will meet senior officials and law enforcement partners to discuss collaboration on cybersecurity, protecting critical infrastructure, countering terrorism and preventing serious and organised crime.

The Cloud Act agreement will now undergo parliamentary and congressional review processes in both countries.

No further legislation is required, after the international production orders bill passed in July pave the way for the deal, although parliament will still be able to disallow it.

The safeguards in the Australia-US deal are still unclear. The [US’s first Cloud Act deal with the UK](#) mandated that each country would gain permission before using the data for death penalty prosecutions in the US, or cases implicating freedom of speech in the UK.

In 2019 Labor welcomed Cloud Act negotiations but questioned whether a deal would require the Coalition to amend [encryption legislation](#).

That legislation attempts to overcome the problem of encrypted messaging by co-opting technology companies, device manufacturers and service providers into building the functionality needed for police to do their spying.

The Law Council and tech firms warned the law could prevent Australia qualifying for a Cloud Act agreement because it may breach the US requirement that foreign countries have robust data privacy protections to receive data from US firms.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 China, Iran exploiting Log4j vulnerability
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/15/china-iran-accused-exploiting-new-log4j-hack-invad/
GIST	<p>Cybersecurity professionals say China, Iran, and other nations’ hackers are exploiting a vulnerability in the open-source logging platform Apache Log4J to get a foothold into networks they intend to breach in the future.</p> <p>The problem has panicked the private sector and federal government alike because the affected software is widely used. Industries involving power, water, food, transportation, and manufacturing were exposed, according to industrial control cybersecurity firm Dragos.</p> <p>Regardless of whether America’s hostile adversaries are responsible for the cyber breach, they are using it now, say the cyber pros. The cybersecurity firm Mandiant said it has seen China and Iran using the vulnerability, which Microsoft said it also saw along with groups from North Korea and Turkey.</p> <p>Mandiant vice president of intelligence analysis John Hultquist said Wednesday that his team expects other state-sponsored hackers are preparing to join China and Iran as well.</p> <p>“We believe these actors will work quickly to create footholds in desirable networks for follow-on activity which may last for some time,” said Mr. Hultquist in a statement. “In some cases, they will work from a</p>

wish list of targets that existed long before this vulnerability was public knowledge. In other cases, desirable targets may be selected after broad targeting.”

Mr. Hultquist said the Iranians observed by Mandiant are “particularly aggressive” and have taken part in ransomware operations that may be geared toward causing chaos over financial gain. Microsoft likewise said on its website that the Iranian group had deployed ransomware and the company observed the Iranians making modifications to the vulnerability.

Check Point, a cybersecurity firm headquartered in Israel and California, said Wednesday it observed the Iranian hacking group using the Log4j vulnerability to go after seven targets in Israel in the previous 24 hours.

The Chinese hackers are a familiar foe for Microsoft. Microsoft identified the Chinese hackers as Hafnium, a group that Microsoft previously claimed was responsible for the hack of its Exchange servers.

Federal authorities later said the Exchange hack compromising tens of thousands of computers were attributable to criminal contract hackers working for China’s Ministry of State Security.

Microsoft said Hafnium’s targets look to have expanded in its use of the new problems with Log4j.

“HAFNIUM, a threat actor group operating out of China, has been observed utilizing the vulnerability to attack virtualization infrastructure to extend their typical targeting,” said Microsoft on its website. “In these attacks, HAFNIUM-associated systems were observed using a [Domain Name Service] service typically associated with testing activity to fingerprint systems.”

The problems associated with the Log4j vulnerability have grown even as cybersecurity professionals are looking to defend against attacks. In a post updated on Wednesday afternoon, Check Point said it had observed more than 1.8 million attempts to exploit the Log4j vulnerability since Friday, which means almost half of the corporate networks it tracks are a target now.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency has said no federal agencies were known to have been compromised thus far.

[Return to Top](#)

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Foreign disinformation stokes terror fears
SOURCE	https://www.voanews.com/a/foreign-disinformation-stokes-fears-of-violence-in-us/6356904.html
GIST	<p>Ongoing efforts by foreign intelligence services and global terrorist organizations to seed the United States with disinformation appear to be working, raising new fears of a terrorist attack in the coming weeks, according to a senior Homeland Security official.</p> <p>The warning, while largely consistent with the department’s most recent anti-terrorism bulletin issued in November, comes as the country prepares for the Christmas holiday and New Year celebrations, along with the one-year anniversary of the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol.</p> <p>“The threat is more volatile,” John Cohen, the senior most official at DHS’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis, told a virtual forum Wednesday.</p> <p>“We’ve made progress. We’re continuing to make progress on a day-to-day basis,” Cohen added. “But we still have a ways to go.”</p> <p>November’s anti-terrorism bulletin warned that the U.S. was facing “a significant threat” from domestic extremists for the remainder of 2021 and extending into early 2022.</p>

But Cohen told the forum, hosted by the George Washington University Program on Extremism, the risks have become more unpredictable due to “a significant level of activity by foreign intelligence organizations,” many gaining traction with unrelenting disinformation campaigns that he described as both persistent and highly sophisticated.

“What makes the environment more volatile, from my perspective, is that the narratives that are being promoted by these threat actors are rapidly finding their way into the mainstream media ecosystem where they're being amplified by public figures, in the media, in government,” he said.

“Their objective may be political or ratings-based,” Cohen said. “But in the current threat environment, the broader that these narratives are shared and spread, the higher the likelihood that they will be consumed by an individual who will use it as a justification for violence.”

Other warnings

This is not the first time Cohen has warned about the dangers of disinformation from foreign intelligence services and terror groups. Nor is he alone in his concerns.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas warned Tuesday of “serious and significant” ramifications from the spread of disinformation.

“False narratives present a threat to our security,” Mayorkas said during the Bloomberg Technology Forum. “We need our leaders to step up and fight against it because the words of leaders, they matter quite a bit. They can be very influential in the public discourse.”

Former intelligence officials and analysts have told VOA the groundwork for the latest destabilizing efforts was laid before the 2020 election, with Russia in particular finding ways to ingratiate a stable of influence peddlers to U.S. audiences on the far right and the far left.

“Generally speaking, getting Kremlin- or Beijing-friendly narratives to be repeated by mainstream outlets is the ultimate end goal of those running malign influence campaigns,” Bret Schafer, a digital disinformation fellow with the Washington-based Alliance for Securing Democracy, told VOA via email.

“It’s far more effective to have messages come from known and trusted sources within a society than from without, so influential figures and outlets have long been targeted by those seeking to influence American public opinion,” he added.

U.S. officials believe Iran and China have copied the Russian playbook, with varying degrees of success.

This past July, social media giant Facebook announced it took down an Iranian campaign known as Tortoiseshell, which aimed to manipulate American military personnel and defense contractors on social media.

That effort by Tehran followed an email campaign launched just ahead of the U.S. 2020 elections aimed at intimidating U.S. voters.

Threatening emails were received by Democratic voters insisting they vote for Donald Trump, allegedly from The Proud Boys. The U.S. government has concluded that Iran and Russia had obtained voter data and were behind the threats.

And as far back as March 2020, senior State Department officials said Russia, China and Iran were finding ways to amplify each other’s disinformation campaigns regarding the origins and the spread of the coronavirus, which causes COVID-19.

A technician assembles coronavirus test kits at the Evolve manufacturing facility in Fremont, Calif., March 26, 2020. The U.S. is seeing Russian, Chinese and Iranian COVID-19 disinformation campaigns converging, a State Department official says.

According to U.S. officials and analysts, these sorts of efforts have only continued to gain in popularity, with a variety of adversaries focused on using many of those same issues to reach and possibly influence vulnerable Americans.

“The first part is, can you rally an audience to do something awful or change a vote or that sort of thing, which is an enduring sort of campaign,” Clint Watts, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, told VOA.

Watts, a former FBI special agent, said the second part of these influence operations is potentially even more dangerous.

“It’s the acute scenario, which means putting [social media] accounts under cover to look like and talk like Americans into spaces where they know there are people that have a propensity to violence,” he said. “It’s a numbers game. ... You throw the idea out and if your audience is large enough, and the larger audience gets it, the greater the chance that one of them will pick up on that and run with it.”

Best defense: informed citizens

Top U.S. law enforcement officials have raised concerns, though this past March, FBI Director Christopher Wray said the bureau’s efforts can only do so much.

"At the end of the day, no amount of FBI investigating can by itself sufficiently insulate our country from this threat," Wray said at the time. "Our best defense is a well-informed public."

Nonetheless, Cohen, the senior intelligence official at the Department of Homeland Security, said Wednesday that helping make sure the American public can see through some of these influence operations has been difficult.

“Trying to educate the public that, depending on where they get their information, they may be specifically being targeted with disinformation, that is the biggest challenge we’re facing right now,” Cohen said. “For a subset of our population, they’re not going to believe what the government is telling them.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Consortium combats soft target attacks
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211215-consortium-to-combat-targeted-crowd-attacks
GIST	<p>The United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has appointed a consortium of 10 universities, including Rutgers University-New Brunswick, to combat terrorist and criminal attacks on soft targets such as schools, hospitals, shopping malls and sports stadiums.</p> <p>The DHS’s Science and Technology Directorate will provide \$3.6 million for the first year of a 10-year grant to fund the new Center of Excellence for Engineering Secure Environments from Targeted Attacks (ESE).</p> <p>“The challenges of keeping people safe in soft targets and crowded spaces gets more complicated every day,” said Fred Roberts, a distinguished professor of mathematics at the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers-New Brunswick, who has been the director of CCICADA, an existing DHS Center of Excellence at Rutgers, since its launch in 2009 and is Rutgers’ principal investigator for the new center. “We are excited to take our work to the next level through a new SENTRY Center of Excellence.” The new center combines the strengths of three such DHS centers, including the Command, Control, and Interoperability Center for Advanced Data Analysis at Rutgers (CCICADA.)</p>

“Researching and developing science and technology solutions to combat emerging threats is a top priority for DHS,” DHS Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas said in a [statement](#). “The new Center of Excellence will provide improved access to high-quality, university-led research and education resources for the department and the broader homeland security enterprise, while at the same time training our nation’s next generation of homeland security leaders.”

Rutgers’ [School of Engineering](#) will also contribute to the new Center of Excellence as part of the Dynamic Digital Twin for Secure and Smart Civic Spaces and Real-time Crowd and Attacker Forecasting for Risk Assessment and Threat Mitigation projects.

[Jie Gong](#), an associate professor in the School of Engineering’s Department of Civil Engineering (CEE) will serve as the principal investigator for these digital twin projects and CEE associate professor, [Jing \(Peter\) Jin](#), will serve as a co-investigator.

At the new center, Rutgers investigators will advance research on real-time threat detection and mitigation, advanced sensing and risk-assessment prediction and deterrence. Project tests will be conducted in the Living Labs at Richard Weeks Hall at Rutgers University-New Brunswick and a field living lab, DataCity Smart Mobility Testing Ground funded by Middlesex County and NJDOT, utilizing an interconnected digital infrastructure and state of the art high-resolution sensing, computing, and 5G communication technologies.

“This project provides the potential to collaborate with DHS, as well as academic, public and private partners to address real-world needs and make our buildings, facilities and societies safer,” Jin said. “If our proposed system is successful, its potential for proactive, real-time responsiveness and situational awareness could change how police and emergency response crews react to terrorist and criminal attacks and emergencies.”

“Through this center, we will have access to experiment with crowd management and security procedures on the extensive campus bus system, lecture halls and dining halls, the campus movie theater and concert venues, and other facilities,” Roberts added. “What we learn from using Rutgers as a ‘living lab’ will provide ideas that can be extended to hundreds of thousands of soft targets and crowded places that the new center will work to protect.”

The new center will also have an extensive program of education and workforce development, co-led by [Margaret Cozzens](#), a research professor at Rutgers University’s CCICADA Center.

“We are excited to be preparing the next generation homeland security workforce,” said Cozzens.

According to DHS, each Center of Excellence is led by a United States college or university in partnership with other academic institutions, industry, national laboratories and other federally funded research and development centers. The ESE research portfolio brings together the best across the nation to ensure DHS counterterrorism capabilities keep pace with new or emerging threats.

Roberts said Rutgers has worked with DHS for more than a decade to develop crowd-safety solutions to combat targeted attacks, tackling security issues such as human trafficking, airport security and plans to secure major mass transit hubs, sports stadiums and other venues nationwide.

Rutgers notes that notable achievements spearheaded by Rutgers’ first DHS-funded center, CCICADA, include creating best practices for stadium security that are now used by all major professional sports leagues in the United States; helping the United States Coast Guard trap hoax callers; developing new procedures for container inspection at ports in collaboration with U.S. Customs and Border Protection; preparing crowd simulations to evacuate the world’s busiest bus terminal at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; and addressing key supply chain challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

	<p>“Over the past decade, our work has led me behind the scenes to some of America’s most iconic sports venues, such as Yankee Stadium,” said Roberts. “We have developed new approaches to security that safeguard the millions of Americans who flock to our major stadiums, arenas and transportation hubs. Hundreds of thousands of soft targets and crowded places such as schools, places of worship and subway stations are still in need of action plans. We are delighted to have a new opportunity to work with DHS to extend our ideas to protect these locations.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Refugee crisis runs into housing crisis
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/us/afghan-refugees-housing.html
GIST	<p>OWENSBORO, Ky. — After a harrowing escape from Afghanistan and three months on a military base in New Jersey, Mohammad bin Rahimi and his family of nine felt fortunate that they would finally have a new home, in Owensboro, a small Kentucky city on the Ohio River.</p> <p>But they didn’t expect to find themselves on the edge of a farm in a cramped, 1850s-era log cabin reminiscent of Daniel Boone and other American pioneers.</p> <p>“We are very happy to be in Kentucky,” said Mr. Rahimi, 48, a former U.S. Embassy security guard in Kabul. He expressed deep gratitude for the warm reception in Owensboro but said his family was afraid to venture outdoors at night, so remote was their new lodging. “We look forward to moving into a real house,” he said.</p> <p>As Afghan refugees are released from bases by the thousands each week to start rebuilding their lives in the United States, they are bumping up against an unexpected obstacle: the housing crisis.</p> <p>Resettlement agencies have been scrambling to find rentals in cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix and St. Louis as well as in towns like Owensboro and Reno, Nev., where lease properties are in short supply, expensive or both. The coronavirus pandemic, complaints of discrimination and the sheer number of newly arriving Afghans have also posed challenges.</p> <p>As of Monday, more than 40,000 Afghans had completed their processing and departed for new homes; some 30,000 others remained on seven military bases that the government hopes to empty as soon as possible.</p> <p>In Reno, a hot real estate market where the average apartment rents for \$1,600, Afghans are being placed in motels, mother-in-law units, people’s basements and Airbnbs, said Carina Black, executive director at Northern Nevada International Center, which has absorbed more refugees in one month than in the past two years combined.</p> <p>“We’re so overwhelmed,” Ms. Black said. “These folks were under the impression they were going into permanent housing when they left the bases. Instead, we are in a broad search for temporary housing.”</p> <p>Owensboro, a city of about 60,000, was considered an ideal location to resettle Afghan refugees: The cost of living is low, jobs are plentiful, and schools are solid.</p> <p>But rentals are scarce.</p> <p>Two Afghan families are living in a 147-year-old convent 15 miles from town. Some are staying in youth centers at churches. And dozens are holed up in a motel.</p> <p>“We are very bored here. My wife cries every day. She is thinking all the time about her family in Afghanistan,” Zakirullah Ahmadzai, 32, said as his wife, Noorsabah Quroishi, 24, was wiping her tears with the fringes of her hijab in the dining room of a Comfort Suites.</p> <p>“We had good life over there. We had good houses. Now we are zero,” said Mr. Ahmadzai, who was a businessman in Afghanistan.</p>

When would they have homes? Would they come with kitchens? Hot running water?

Those were some of the questions that 18 Afghan men in the lobby of the Comfort Suites lobbied at Khaibar Shafaq, an English-speaking evacuee who worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross and has assumed the role of interlocutor between his fellow Afghans and the International Center, the local resettlement agency.

“We are really happy here. But since we are with the family, it would have been much better to move to our houses,” said Haji Mohammad Yarmal, a father of four.

Landlords and property managers, who can afford to be picky in a tight market, have been reluctant to take a chance on foreigners who still lack jobs and permanent residency status, and who often have large families. Many have demanded credit history, background checks and co-signers, all of which aren’t typically required of newly arrived refugees.

“They don’t say ‘no,’” said Diana Ford, a community leader who is leading an extensive volunteer effort to assist the newcomers. “They say, ‘We don’t have anything available.’”

Unlike refugees moving to cities like Sacramento and Houston, with established Afghan communities, evacuees arriving in smaller towns have no relatives to take them in.

Ms. Ford has tapped business and faith leaders and local foundations to help find Afghans housing, cover their motel rooms and feed them — to spare the refugees from having to dip into their one-time cash stipends from the U.S. government, usually about \$1,200 per family member, that are intended for rent.

In big cities, refugees are finding that rentals are plentiful but the cost prohibitively high. In small towns like Owensboro, prices are lower, but inventory is extremely limited.

“Already we had a shortage of rental properties, and now we have Afghan families desperately needing a place to live,” said Jaclyn Graves, chief executive of the Greater Owensboro Realtor Association.

The market has long catered to home buyers attracted to that town, which is between Louisville and Nashville, where “you can get a lot of bang for the buck,” Ms. Graves said.

But the Afghans are unlikely to be able to afford to buy a home until they have jobs and steady income.

The log cabin idea originated when Bruce Kunze, a retired school counselor, got a call last month from Ms. Ford, an old friend, asking if he knew where a newly arrived family of nine could temporarily live.

“I told her, we have this cabin, it’s empty and we’d be happy for them to stay,” Mr. Kunze recalled.

Because Mr. Kunze was out of town, Ms. Ford’s husband had to climb through the roof to get inside and unlock it. Soon the Rahimis were moving in.

The pace of arrivals in town ramped up rapidly, with 30 people arriving on some days.

By late November, the Comfort Suites had become a bustling Afghan hub. A team led by Mr. Shafaq created spreadsheets with details about the people in each room, including ages, clothing sizes, languages spoken and professions.

Ms. Ford raised money to supply lunches daily from Panera, Red Lobster and other eateries. A former cook for the U.S. military began preparing dinner each night at First Christian Church, with donated ingredients and halal meat supplied by a mosque in nearby Evansville, Ind.

A sense of community has blossomed among the 160 Afghans at the motel, who have different ethnic, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds.

On a balmy autumn afternoon, children in the parking lot sped around on a luggage cart. Others played volleyball with soccer balls, as adults tapped away on their cellphones. Volunteers unloaded hygiene products, prayer rugs and other items from cars, and ferried people to dental and medical appointments.

Over a dinner of Afghan chicken, cabbage stew and salad, several adolescent girls who had become fast friends said they relished being in America, where bombs did not jolt them awake at night and the Taliban could not stifle their dreams. Mursal Nazari, 15, who aspires to become a doctor, highlighted the greenery, the calm and the kind people she had met in Owensboro.

But life in the motel is monotonous. Outings are limited to the occasional trip to Walmart, a park or the mosque for Friday prayers. Although the refugees are grateful to be in the United States, frustration is rising.

“People were told they would go directly to houses when they left the bases,” Mr. Shafaq said. “What has been told to them is not actually happening. They are losing trust in the process.”

Tom Watson, the mayor of Owensboro, said that with so many refugees landing at once, it was important to conduct reviews of the arrivals before settling them in permanent housing. “We don’t know who we got,” he said, noting that he had requested a “file” on every Afghan. “I need to know just from the public safety standpoint.”

Susan Montalvo-Gesser, a local lawyer who is on the board of the International Center, drafted a letter to Owensboro landlords and property managers to ease any concerns.

Afghan refugees, she wrote, “have had more extensive background checks” than local rental applicants, whose records are verified only against state criminal and eviction records. The letter also said that the resettlement agency was willing to co-sign leases.

A few days later, there was a breakthrough.

“We got 12 to 13 more houses today,” said Anna Allen, director of the International Center. “Another landlord said that not only does he have an apartment, but he’s going to have 12 more units available next month.”

“I’m feeling on top of the world,” she said. “I can breathe.”

Ten miles outside of town, the two-room log cabin where the Rahimis remain is invitingly cozy. Its honey-hued interior features an antique spinning wheel, wooden high chair and stone chimney.

But the Rahimis are still not accustomed to their rustic, if temporary, abode. After the noise and bustle of Kabul, they said that the quiet, and creatures, of the countryside unnerved them. Worried about wasps that sometimes lurk upstairs, all nine are camping out in the downstairs room.

“We grew up in the city,” said Mirnesa Rahimi, who has tried to reassure her seven children that, in the enveloping silence of the rolling farmlands that stretch in every direction, there is nothing to fear.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Months to book CIA prisoners into Gitmo
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/us/politics/guantanamo-bay-cia-prisoners.html
GIST	GUANTÁNAMO BAY, Cuba — Criminal investigators at Guantánamo Bay waited nearly three months before obtaining DNA samples and fingerprints from the accused plotters of the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, and the U.S.S. Cole, it was disclosed this week, further deepening the mystery of who was responsible for the prisoners in their earliest days here.

The question of who was in charge — the C.I.A. or the U.S. military — is key to defense lawyers' efforts to exclude potential evidence from two death-penalty cases at Guantánamo. The lawyers have argued that years of C.I.A. detention and torture of the prisoners have tainted the evidence.

The issue of responsibility for the prisoners is so sensitive that national security censors recently redacted a statement made in court by a defense lawyer for Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who is [accused of plotting the Sept. 11 attacks](#). Rita J. Radostitz, the lawyer, told the court on Nov. 19 that in the months after the detainees' transfer to the military prison zone, their guards were working for the C.I.A., not the Defense Department. Prosecutors did not protest at the time, and no one used the mute button to block audio of classified information. But the comment was later [blacked out from the public transcript](#) of the proceedings.

In the Sept. 11 case, lawyers are in the midst of many months of witness testimony to help the trial judge determine whether in early 2007, after years in C.I.A. custody, Mr. Mohammed and other defendants freely described to F.B.I. interrogators their roles in the Sept. 11 attacks. Prosecutors call the testimony key trial evidence; defense lawyers say the prisoners told the agents [what the C.I.A. had groomed them to say](#) through torture and years of isolation at secret detention facilities known as black sites.

Lawyers for Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a Saudi prisoner who is accused of planning Al Qaeda's suicide bombing of the U.S.S. Cole in Aden harbor in Yemen in October 2000, also consider his interrogation by the F.B.I. in 2007 to be involuntary.

Mr. Nashiri is one of three prisoners the C.I.A. has confirmed it waterboarded to obtain information after his arrest in Dubai in October 2002. Between 2002 and 2006, he was held in a series of secret C.I.A.-run prisons overseas, including a black site at Guantánamo Bay. The Guantánamo site, called Echo II, operated in 2003 and 2004. C.I.A. guards there dressed as soldiers, and F.B.I. agents interrogated detainees there in 2007.

Mr. Nashiri's lawyers have been calling witnesses this month in an effort to persuade the judge to exclude a piece of key trial evidence in that case: a swab of Mr. Nashiri's cheek taken at Guantánamo that partly matched a DNA sample taken from a site in Aden, Yemen, that was an observation point for the U.S.S. Cole bombing, which killed 17 U.S. sailors.

Defense lawyers argue that Mr. Nashiri was in his fourth year of U.S. custody and that under the Fourth Amendment, the law enforcement authorities needed to obtain a warrant from a military or federal court to take the cheek swab and other samples. The judge, Col. Lanny J. Acosta Jr., agreed to hear the argument even as a higher court was considering [whether a prisoner at Guantánamo Bay is entitled to due process rights](#) guaranteed by the Constitution.

In court on Monday, Mark A. Miller, a prosecutor, called the collection of the samples on Nov. 30, 2006 — more than 80 days after the detainees were brought to Guantánamo — “pursuant to a standard protocol” for a person “coming into a prisoner of war facility” or a “law of war facility.”

No explanation was offered for the delay, although the detainee processing took place after [President George W. Bush announced](#) on Sept. 6, 2006, that the prisoners were at Guantánamo. One reason for the disclosure, he said, was that “to start the process for bringing them to trial, we must bring them into the open.” Mr. Nashiri was arraigned in 2011, and the case has been repeatedly stalled through higher court challenges.

Several law enforcement agents on Monday described how, during their assignment to the Criminal Investigation Task Force, a prosecution support organization created by the Defense Department, they undertook the collection process on Nov. 30, 2006, in their first encounter with the former C.I.A. detainees. The agents operated what Mr. Miller called an “assembly line” to photograph, fingerprint and take DNA samples of each of the 14 prisoners, who were shackled at the wrists and ankles and guided through the process by two guards.

None of the men protested, complained or mentioned mistreatment, said Chief Warrant Officer Leona Mansapit of the Army. A military police soldier at the time, she took fingerprints from some of the prisoners. "It was very routine," she said, aside from the late hour.

An investigator who took part in the processing, George E. Boyles, who had served in law enforcement and military roles since the late 1980s, said that evening at Guantánamo Bay was the only occasion in his career that he had taken what was essentially booking samples of suspects in their fourth year in custody.

Capt. Brian L. Mizer of the Navy, a military defense lawyer for Mr. Nashiri, accused the prosecutors of advancing "a sham argument that this was a routine booking procedure happening three months after they got here and four years after they came into U.S. custody." Such procedures are done at the time of an arrest, Mr. Nashiri's lawyers said, to confirm an identity or check for arrest warrants.

"I really don't know where they were at before I saw them on Guantánamo Bay," said Sheldon J. Beddo, a Naval Criminal Investigative Service agent who was based there in 2006 and oversaw the evidence collection at "a location I was not familiar with" made up of prefabricated buildings.

The question of who was in control of the detainees at Guantánamo Bay during that period has been in dispute for years. In 2014, a Senate Intelligence Committee study not only disclosed that there had been two C.I.A. black sites at the Navy base but also described Camp 7, the prison where Mr. Nashiri, Mr. Mohammed and other high-value detainees were held, as under the operational control of the C.I.A. during their first months at Guantánamo.

A former Army officer, however, has [testified anonymously](#) that he was in charge of Camp 7 from the day the detainees arrived, even if the guards there were not Defense Department employees.

The prisoners who were brought to Guantánamo in 2006 spent their first month in isolation before their first meetings with delegates of the International Red Cross, the humanitarian organization that visits prisoners and can deliver messages to families and register complaints about conditions with the detaining authority.

Mr. Nashiri was interrogated by F.B.I. and N.C.I.S. agents in early 2007 and had a status hearing before a military board in March of that year. He was allowed to see a lawyer for the first time in 2008.

[Return to Top](#)

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Tukwila arson probe: 5 fires in 20min span
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/arson-investigation-underway-five-fires-20-minute-span-tukwila/7J6CY2ZD4VHWDFKUYKHMDMCQOY/
GIST	<p>TUKWILA, Wash. — Arson investigators are looking into five suspicious fires that broke out in a 20-minute span in Tukwila.</p> <p>"These are suspicious in nature because they were all so close together and really separate fires, but closely associated," Tukwila Fire Chief Jay Wittwer said.</p> <p>Wittwer said the first call came in at 2:50 a.m. on Wednesday. Firefighters received a report of a commercial vehicle fire on Industry Drive.</p> <p>The vehicle belonged to ProShred Seattle, a mobile paper-shredding company owned by Natalie LaBerge. She said the truck, which contained the machinery necessary to shred documents, will cost about \$250,000 to replace.</p>

	<p>“Your first thought is, ‘Could this be targeted at us, specifically? Is there anything we did?’ But no, this is just a random event that it sounds like they went to a series of different locations,” LaBerge said. “It was just an arson(ist) doing what arson(ist)s do.”</p> <p>Wittwer said as firefighters were putting out the fire at ProShred Seattle, another fire broke out a short distance away.</p> <p>“They saw another column (of smoke),” Wittwer said. “Shortly after that, two more fires (broke out) not far from (that) location.”</p> <p>No injuries were reported at any of the fires.</p> <p>“If you want to start fires and cause damage in this region, know that we’re going to come and find you,” Wittwer said. “If you see something, say something. Report it. We are seeing many suspicious fires all across the region.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 KCSO helicopters cause buzz over Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.capitolhillseattle.com/2021/12/photo-assignment-king-county-sheriff-choppers-cause-buzz-over-seattle/
GIST	<p>An unusual deployment of two King County Sheriff’s helicopters simultaneously over Seattle and low flights over Capitol Hill and the Central District sent hundreds of people turning to CHS to find out what was going on Wednesday morning.</p> <p>According to a department’s spokesperson, it is very unusual for both helicopters to be in the air simultaneously but it has been a busy day for the office’s unique air unit.</p> <p>Today was a scheduled session for collecting “contemporary photos” of the choppers at work in the area for use by the sheriff’s department in things like promotions and social media.</p> <p>The morning also brought a reported bank robbery in Woodinville in which both helicopters assisted. “There is no harm for community safety, this is all goodwill,” the spokesperson told CHS.</p> <p>The King County Sheriff’s Air Support Unit is the only “full-time rotary-wing law enforcement aviation unit in Washington State.” The unit operates as Guardian 1 with a Bell 206B3 helicopter, a UH-1H “Huey” helicopter received from a federal surplus program, and a Bell 407 paid for with regional Homeland Security funding. The unit operates six days a week and is in the air around 100 hours per month.</p> <p>A third helicopter’s flight over the area around the same time Wednesday just before noon was apparently unrelated to the KCSO activity.</p> <p>With many people still working from home and the area’s extra elevation sometimes providing a better view of the horizon, it doesn’t take much for mystery aircraft to cause a stir over Capitol Hill. The treatment of the area as a flight and training test zone also adds to the situation. In October 2020, CHS reported on training flights involving Black Hawk helicopters from Joint Base Lewis-McChord over Capitol Hill. Residents in the area are still recovering from night after night of Guardian 1 and Washington State Patrol aircraft activity over the area providing surveillance during the 2020 protests. CHS reported here on the surprisingly detailed surveillance imagery captured by the surprisingly loud and annoying WSP plane.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Overnight fires Puget Sound region
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/building-destroyed-by-olympia-fire-one-of-several-in-region/

GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Fire crews in Olympia, Washington, responded to a large downtown commercial blaze early Wednesday that damaged nearly a dozen buildings, city officials said.</p> <p>The blaze was one of several overnight in the Puget Sound region, including one in a vacant commercial building in Lakewood, where police said they found a body. It was too early to say if that fire or death was suspicious, police said.</p> <p>The Olympia fire started around 5 a.m. at a five-story residential building under construction. Kevin Bossard, assistant chief of operations with the Olympia Fire Department, told The Olympian the building is a total loss.</p> <p>Among the other buildings nearby that were damaged were Pete Lea’s Automotive Medical Center, Union Gospel Vision Clinic, Revival Motors and Coffee, and August Creative, a web design consultant.</p> <p>City Manager Jay Burney in a statement called the fire a “devastating blow for the entire community.”</p> <p>He said fire officials confirmed that a family living in one of the buildings was safe but lost their home and belongings.</p> <p>“We are enormously grateful that no lives were lost, and no one was injured,” Burney said. He also said officials do not yet know what caused the blaze.</p> <p>Bossard said the damage is at least \$1 million, which means the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives will assist the investigation into the origin and cause of the fire.</p> <p>The Tukwila Fire Department also responded to five fires near several businesses. The blazes were extinguished and nobody was injured.</p> <p>“Obviously suspicious,” Tukwila Fire Department spokesperson Jack Waller told KOMO. Officials were investigating.</p> <p>Smaller fires were reported north of downtown Seattle in a three-story building under construction and home’s garage. No injuries were reported. The Seattle Fire Department said the fires were intentionally set and that a 25-year-old man had been arrested, The Seattle Times reported.</p>
Return to Top	

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/16 Baltimore officer ambushed on duty; shot
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/nation-world/breaking-officer-in-critical-condition-after-being-shot-multiple-times
GIST	<p>BALTIMORE (WBFF) — A Baltimore City Police officer was ambushed and shot while in their marked police cruiser in south Baltimore, officials said Thursday.</p> <p>Dr. Thomas Scalea, of Shock Trauma in Baltimore, said the officer's prognosis is "guarded." Police say the shooting happened in the 4400 block of Pennington Avenue.</p> <p>"I am asking anyone who knows anything, who has heard anything, who saw something, who knows somebody who knows something, to please call police right away," said Baltimore City Police Commissioner Michael Harrison.</p> <p>"First and foremost, I ask that the entire city of Baltimore pray for our officer, for the officer's family, for the officer's coworkers, and for the community in which this happened," said Mayor Brandon Scott.</p>

	<p>Around 1:30 a.m. on Dec. 16, 2021, officers responded to reports of a vehicle crash on Pennington Avenue.</p> <p>Once on the scene, officers discovered the crash involved a police officer and that the officer had been shot multiple times.</p> <p>Police say the officer was on duty and in a marked police vehicle when an unidentified suspect walked up to the car from behind, firing shots.</p> <p>Investigators believe the officer accelerated from a parked position and crashed a short time later.</p> <p>The officer was rushed to the hospital with injuries from the crash and multiple gunshot wounds around 2:15 a.m.</p> <p>Scalea said the officer is critically ill and on full life support. The officer is in the operating room for life-saving surgery.</p> <p>"I would say we will know more in the hours and days to come. We are certainly doing our best to keep this person both on Earth and to recover as best we can," said Dr. Scalea</p> <p>The officer has not yet been identified.</p> <p>"There's been a lot of divisive talk over the last several years around police, around connecting with our community, around violence, but tonight this is reality. And the reality is men and women do their best job to put on Baltimore Police Department uniforms and go to protect our citizens and there's no way that the Mayor of Baltimore, the police commissioner, the state's attorney, and Dr. Scalea should be standing here tonight," said Baltimore City Council President Nick Mosby.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Arrest: threat to harm school students
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/lynnwood-junior-high-student-arrested-after-allegedly-threatening-other-student-school
GIST	<p>LYNNEOOD, Wash. — A Lynnwood junior high school student has been arrested after the 14-year-old teen threatened another student via text messages and also indicated an intent to harm others at the school.</p> <p>The unidentified student who attended Meadowdale Middle School was booked into the Denney Juvenile Justice Center and expected to faces charges for harassment and threat, a spokesperson for the Lynnwood Police Department said in a written statement.</p> <p>The texts to the student who received them included images of weapons, the statement said. The boy's parents contacted police after being told by their son about the threatening text messages, police said.</p> <p>According to police, the teen was taken into custody at his home without incident.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Pierce Co. teens: \$700,000 in damages
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/teens-charged-with-burglarizing-vandalizing-pierce-county-homes-causing-700k-in-damage
GIST	<p>PIERCE COUNTY, Wash. - Two teenagers were arrested for allegedly burglarizing and vandalizing several homes in Pierce County.</p> <p>The sheriff's office says two teens, age 15 and 17, went through several homes and buildings, smashing glass, destroying appliances, kicking in doors and even burning a house down. Deputies identified them through fingerprints left behind at multiple sites.</p>

	<p>Authorities say they also damaged three schools and stole \$1,300 in tablets.</p> <p>The sheriff's office says the two caused more than \$700,000 in damage. They were charged with 13 felonies, including arson, vandalism and theft.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 South King Co. cities face rising violence
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/violent-night-in-south-king-county-as-city-mayors-grapple-with-rising-violence
GIST	<p>AUBURN, Wash. - Law enforcement are investigating several violent incidents that occurred in the South Sound on Wednesday.</p> <p>Around 2:30 p.m., Auburn police were called to a home for reports of a roommate dispute that turned violent. One roommate shot the other, killing him. The roommate who fired the shots has been taken into custody.</p> <p>In Renton around 7 p.m., two people who were acquainted with each other got into a fight while in a car. The woman was shot in the stomach and has serious injuries. The suspect drove off with her in the car, saw an ambulance nearby and pulled over and dropped her off at the ambulance, police said. He later went back to the scene and spoke to officers and the suspect is in custody.</p> <p>Then, at 8:12 p.m., Des Moines police responded to a stabbing in the 21500 block of 12th Ave S. Police say there was an argument between a brother and sister, and the sister stabbed her brother in the chest. The brother was taken to Harborview Medical Center where he is in critical condition.</p> <p>Police are still investigating their respective incidents.</p> <p>City leaders in South King County are now calling for action and taking a regional approach to address the rise in crime.</p> <p>These three incidents come just two weeks after the Federal Way mayor called on a handful of South Sound mayors to meet and address the rise in violence in each city.</p> <p>The Mayors of Auburn, Kent, Renton, Tukwila and Federal Way were supposed to meet with King County Executive Dow Constantine, the King County Prosecutor, the King County Adult and Juvenile Detention and law enforcement to come up with a coordinated safety plan to hold criminals accountable.</p> <p>However, it doesn't appear that the mayors have met yet.</p> <p>All the aforementioned cities have seen an uptick in violence over the last several months.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 German court: Russia 'state terrorism'
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/german-court-accuses-russia-state-terrorism-over-2019-berlin-park-n1286041
GIST	<p>Russia ordered the killing in broad daylight in a Berlin park of a former Chechen militant, a German court found on Wednesday, sentencing the agent who carried out the 2019 act of "state terrorism" to life imprisonment.</p> <p>Georgian citizen Tornike Khangoshvili was killed with three shots from a Glock pistol on a sunny August day in 2019 in retaliation for his role fighting alongside Chechen separatists against Moscow in the 2000s, Judge Olaf Arnoldi said. He sentenced Vadim Krasikov for the "especially serious" crime.</p> <p>Germany summoned the Russian ambassador after the ruling, telling him that two of his embassy's 101 diplomatic staff would be expelled, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said.</p>

The finding could heighten pressure on a German government barely a week in office to toughen its stance towards Moscow amid warnings that Russia could be contemplating [military action against Ukraine](#).

"State organs of the government of the Russian Federation took the decision to liquidate Tornike Khangoshvili in Berlin," Arnoldi said, adding that Russia had issued Krasikov with false papers with which to travel for the killing.

"Khangashvili had given up the fight against the Russian Federation years before. He had not held a weapon in his hands since 2008," Arnoldi said. "This was not an act of self-defence by Russia. This was and is nothing other than state terrorism."

The Russian Embassy in Berlin said the verdict was "not objective and politically motivated", TASS news agency reported.

"This murder, ordered by a state, is a serious violation of German law and Germany's sovereignty," Baerbock said. "Acts like the murder in (Berlin's) Tiergarten park seriously burden relations between our countries."

In 2019, Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) described Khangashvili as a "bloody terrorist", accusing him of involvement in crimes including the 2004 bombing of the Moscow metro in which 10 people died.

A lawyer for the suspect, who maintains he is not Krasikov but Vadim Sokolov, a construction engineer from St. Petersburg, promised a decision on whether to appeal within a week, saying the case against his client was built on conjecture, not proof.

Arnoldi acknowledged that Khangoshvili, who had lived in exile since an earlier attempt on his life in Tbilisi, Georgia in 2015, was himself a killer. But the judge said his murder was a "professional operation" that could not have been carried out without local assistance in Berlin.

Arnoldi said that Krasikov flew to Paris several days before the hit, equipped with a false passport and thousands of euros in cash for his planned getaway, and from there journeyed to Berlin.

He shot Khangoshvili as he cycled through the park, before hiding in a bush to remove his dark clothes and baseball cap, trim his beard and don the clothes of a tourist strolling through Germany's capital.

Only the presence of witnesses thwarted his plan, Arnoldi said. Within minutes, armed police surrounded Krasikov while others fished his clothes, the murder weapon and Khangoshvili's bike out of the river where the agent had thrown them.

Russia has maintained that the convicted murderer is not Krasikov. But Arnoldi said that pictures provided by Ukrainian authorities from his wedding to his Ukrainian wife, together with a comparison of their tattoos, proved beyond all doubt that the bearer of the false papers was the man they had identified as an agent of Russia's FSB security service.

The fact that he had obtained false papers just over a month before the hit showed that he was backed by the Russian state, Arnoldi said, noting that Russian law allowed its agents to assassinate "terrorists", even abroad, albeit only with presidential approval.

"Four children lost their father, two siblings their brother," the judge said.

"Some media suggested that Russia or even Vladimir Putin are on trial here. That's misleading: only the convict is on the bench."

Security experts warn that agents established at large legacy embassies in formerly Soviet-allied states in eastern Europe can easily travel anywhere in the [European Union](#).

	<p>The year before the killing, Russian agents poisoned a former Russian agent and his daughter in a provincial English city.</p> <p>Russia's western embassies have attracted attention in connection with mysterious deaths before. Earlier this year, a young diplomat was found dead on a Berlin street after having seemingly fallen from a window on an upper floor of the embassy. Russia refused to allow an autopsy and repatriated the body.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/16 Report: 11 executions mark 3-decade low
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/report-11-executions-in-2021-mark-three-decade-low/
GIST	<p>CHICAGO (AP) — States and the federal government carried out 11 executions this year, the fewest since 1988, as support for the death penalty has continued to decline.</p> <p>That's according to an annual report on the death penalty released Thursday, which was also sharply critical of the Supreme Court and its role in green-lighting executions. Three of the death sentences were carried out in January during an unprecedented run of federal executions that ended days before President Donald Trump left office. Annual executions have steadily declined since peaking at 98 in 1999.</p> <p>Pandemic-related disruptions partly accounted for the low number of executions this year — though 2021 marked the seventh consecutive year when there were fewer than 30 executions and fewer than 50 new death sentences, the report said.</p> <p>The federal death penalty was put on hold in June by Attorney General Merrick Garland, well short of the permanent abolition activists hoped for when Joe Biden became the first sitting U.S. president to have openly opposed the death penalty. State executions continue despite growing numbers of Americans opposed to the death penalty.</p> <p>The report from the Death Penalty Information Center said far from representing the “worst of the worst,” 10 of the 11 prisoners executed this year had “significant impairments,” including IQs in the intellectually disabled range.</p> <p>Many cases were tainted by poor legal representation at trial and jurisdictions engaging in “shocking conduct” to thwart judicial review of credible constitutional claims, the report said.</p> <p>“As death-penalty usage continues to erode, its flaws become even more evident,” the report from the Washington, D.C.-based center said.</p> <p>The report also noted the three conservative appointments to the Supreme Court by Trump and said the justices demonstrated “deep hostility to stays of execution,” denying or lifting every stay of execution requested — other than a few on religious grounds that inmates should have fuller access to spiritual advisers.</p> <p>The report also noted how some death-penalty states scrambled for alternative execution methods after pharmaceutical companies restricted access to drugs once widely used for lethal injections. It highlighted Arizona's proposal this year to use the same cyanide hydrogen gas deployed by Nazis to kill Jews.</p> <p>Support for the death penalty, meanwhile, has plummeted from a high of 80% in 1994 to 54% this year, according to a 2021 Gallup poll cited in the report. Since the mid-1990s, opposition has risen from under 20% to around 45% now.</p> <p>States also continue to rescind death penalty laws. Virginia, once a prolific executioner, did so in March, bringing the number of states to have abolished the death penalty to 23. Three, including California, have moratoriums on executions.</p>

Executions have been increasingly concentrated in a few Southern states. Texas executed three inmates and Oklahoma two in 2021. Alabama, Mississippi and Missouri each executed one. The Trump administration executed three. The last, Dustin Higgs, was executed five days before Joe Biden's inauguration. The federal executions brought the year's total to 11.

Trump's Justice Department executed 10 federal prisoners in 2020, ending a 17-year hiatus as COVID raged through prisons. States suspended their death penalty programs during the height of the pandemic.

Among other report highlights:

— Seven states imposed 18 new death sentences in 2021 — tying a record low. Alabama and Oklahoma imposed four each. California and Texas both imposed three. Florida imposed two and Nebraska and Tennessee one each.

— Six of the 11 inmates executed in 2021 were Black. Black and Hispanic defendants made up more than 60% of the death sentences imposed this year.

Sign up for Evening Brief

Delivered weeknights, this email newsletter gives you a quick recap of the day's top stories and need-to-know news, as well as intriguing photos and topics to spark conversation as you wind down from your day.

— Some 2,500 prisoners remain on state death rows. Some 50 are left on federal death row at a Terre Haute, Indiana, prison after the Trump executions reduced their numbers by nearly a quarter.

The Justice Department's June order halted federal executions while it reviewed Trump-era practices. The Biden administration also withdrew notices of intent to seek the death penalty in several cases. But the administration did still keep pressing for death sentences for white supremacist Dylann Roof, convicted in the 2015 slayings of nine members of a Black congregation in South Carolina, and for Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

Despite a campaign pledge to decisively end executions, Biden hasn't addressed the issue publicly as president. The report noted he hasn't backed legislation to strike the death penalty from U.S. statutes. Activists fear federal executions could restart if Trump were to run again for president and win a second term or if another capital punishment advocate becomes president.

The report spotlighted several individual executions.

It described Oklahoma's execution of John Grant on Oct. 28 as "botched." The 60-year-old, convicted in the 1998 slaying of a prison cafeteria worker, repeatedly convulsed and vomited after his lethal injection. Oklahoma's Department of Corrections said the execution occurred "without complication."

The report also pointed to the May 19 Texas execution of Quintin Jones, 41, convicted of killing his great aunt in 1999. It proceeded without media witnesses, the first time since Texas resumed capital punishment in 1982 that no journalist was present. Officials blamed a failure to bring in reporters waiting nearby on miscommunication.

Two death row inmates were exonerated in 2021, both in Mississippi. One, Eddie Lee Howard Jr., who is Black, was freed after spending 26 years on death row after debunked bite-mark testimony and DNA evidence cleared him in the 1992 rape and killing of an 84-year-old white woman.

Those exonerations bring the total number of exonerees out of more than 9,600 death sentences since the early 1970s to 186, the report said.

That figure, it added, "revealed that the American death-penalty system is even more frighteningly unreliable than was previously understood."

HEADLINE	12/15 Arrests: Queen Anne buildings set on fire
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/police-makes-arson-arrest-after-two-queen-anne-buildings-intentionally-set-on-fire/
GIST	<p>Two buildings under construction on the east side of Seattle’s Queen Anne neighborhood were intentionally set on fire early Wednesday morning, according to the Seattle Fire Department.</p> <p>Damage from both fires are estimated to be about \$200,000, SFD said. They occurred close to each other, one in an attached garage of a house that appears to be vacant near Prospect Street and Sixth Avenue, and the other at a building near Highland Drive and Taylor Avenue North.</p> <p>A 25-year-old man was arrested in connection to the second fire, after witnesses reported seeing a man yelling and upending a portable toilet at the construction site at about 3 a.m., Seattle police said Wednesday afternoon.</p> <p>Witnesses also said they saw the man leave on a scooter as flames rose up from the location. Police said an investigation is underway to determine whether he was involved with the other fire.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/15 Seattle PD seized 650,000 fentanyl pills 2021
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3283868/seattle-police-seized-650k-fentanyl-2021/
GIST	<p>Seattle police have seized 650,000 fentanyl pills in 2021, 10 times what they got last year.</p> <p>This comes in the same year that fentanyl deaths doubled in King County, reaching a total of 331.</p> <p>Department of Homeland Security Special Agent in Charge Robert Hammer says right now in King County, fentanyl “is everywhere on the streets.”</p> <p>“There are millions upon millions of pills at any given time in this community,” Hammer said.</p> <p>And it is a crime of deception, as fentanyl is deliberately designed to look like ordinary pain pills.</p> <p>“These are counterfeit pills,” Hammer said. “They are legitimately stamped with the markings of another type of pill.”</p> <p>Along with the deception comes violence. Seattle police seized 57 handguns, nine rifles, and four shotguns this year, interim SPD Chief Adrian Diaz said.</p> <p>Hammer explained that fentanyl is largely the drug of choice for manufacturers in Mexico to produce and for cartels to smuggle through a highly organized transportation network.</p> <p>“It’s cheaper to manufacture and the high is greater. ... This is a multi-billion-dollar industry set up by these drug cartels that know exactly how to exploit and victimize individuals,” Hammer said.</p> <p>Even small amounts of fentanyl can be deadly, so Hammer says it’s very important for parents to warn their kids about not taking these pills at parties.</p> <p>“A young person at a party may think that they’re taking a legitimate painkiller, but it’s very likely to be laced with fentanyl — and that pill could kill them,” Diaz said.</p> <p>Hammer pointed out that this has already happened among high school students in King County.</p>

“I have two kids in high school, and I am in fear when they go out to parties with other friends because I am afraid someone is going to bring some pills, ... and one of those kids is going to die,” Hammer said, adding, “I cannot stress enough what the chief said about having those conversations.”

KIRO Radio’s Hanna Scott reported in November that King County saw a 24% increase in deadly overdoses in 2020. By the third quarter of 2021, the county had already surpassed that increase and was on track to see the largest spike in fatal overdoses from drugs and alcohol in a decade, according to recent data [from the King County Medical Examiner](#).

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 JFK assassination documents made public
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/15/john-f-kennedy-assassination-documents-released
GIST	<p>The National Archives on Wednesday made public nearly 1,500 documents related to the US government’s investigation into the 1963 assassination of John F Kennedy.</p> <p>The disclosure of secret cables, internal memos and other documents satisfies a deadline set in October by Joe Biden and is in keeping with a federal statute that calls for the release of records in the government’s possession. Additional documents are expected to be made public next year.</p> <p>There was no immediate indication that the records contained revelations that could radically reshape the public’s understanding of the events surrounding the 22 November 1963 assassination of Kennedy in Dallas at the hands of Lee Harvey Oswald.</p> <p>But the latest tranche of documents was nonetheless eagerly anticipated by historians and others who, decades after the Kennedy killing, remain skeptical that, at the height of the cold war, a troubled young man with a mail-order rifle was solely responsible for an assassination that changed the course of American history.</p> <p>The documents include CIA cables and memos discussing Oswald’s previously disclosed but never fully explained visits to the Soviet and Cuban embassies in Mexico City as well as discussion, in the days after the assassination, of the potential of Cuban involvement in the killing of Kennedy.</p> <p>One CIA cable describes how Oswald phoned the Soviet embassy while in Mexico City to ask for a visa to visit the Soviet Union. He also visited the Cuban embassy, apparently interested in a travel visa that would permit him to visit Cuba and wait there for a Soviet visa. On 3 October, more than one month before the assassination, he drove back into the US through a crossing at the Texas border.</p> <p>Another memo, dated the day after Kennedy’s assassination, says that according to an intercepted phone call in Mexico City, Oswald communicated with a KGB officer while at the Soviet embassy that September.</p> <p>After Kennedy was killed, Mexican authorities arrested a Mexican employee of the Cuban embassy with whom Oswald had communicated, and she said Oswald had “professed to be a communist and an admirer of Castro”, according to the cable.</p> <p>One CIA document marked “Secret Eyes Only” traces US government plots to assassinate the Cuban leader at the time, Fidel Castro, including a 1960 plot “that involved the use of the criminal underworld with contacts inside Cuba”.</p> <p>Another document weighs whether Oswald, while living in New Orleans, might have been affected in any way by the publication in the local newspaper of an interview an Associated Press correspondent conducted with Castro in which Castro warned of retribution if the US were to take out Cuban leaders.</p> <p>The new files include several FBI reports on the bureau’s efforts to investigate and surveil major mafia figures like Santo Trafficante Jr and Sam Giancana, who are often mentioned in conspiracy theories about Kennedy’s assassination.</p>

Apart from the Kennedy investigation, some of the material will be of interest to scholars or anyone interested in the minutiae of 1960s counterespionage, with pages and pages of arcane details on such things as the methods, equipment and personnel used to surveil the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City.

In blocking the release of hundreds of records in 2017 because of concerns from the FBI and the CIA, Donald Trump cited “potentially irreversible harm”. Even so, [about 2,800 other records](#) were released at that time.

The Warren commission in 1964 concluded that Oswald had been the lone gunman, and another congressional investigation in 1979 found no evidence to support the theory that the CIA had been involved. But other interpretations have persisted.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 Jan 6 probe: 80 charged have military ties
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/capitol-riot-january-6-military-ties/
GIST	<p><i>Washington</i> — More than 80 of the defendants charged in relation to the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol have ties to the U.S. military — most of those with a military background were veterans.</p> <p>A CBS News analysis of service records, attorney statements, and court documents has found that at least 81 current or former service members face charges and are accused of participating in the mob that led Congress to temporarily halt its counting of the 2020 presidential election's Electoral College votes.</p> <p>The Justice Department has so far charged more than 700 individuals in connection with the Capitol breach.</p> <p>While an overwhelming majority of those with military ties were veterans when they were charged, at least five were currently in the military when they participated in the attack. One was an active-duty Marine, and four were part-time troops, either in the Army Reserve or National Guard.</p> <p>Court documents assert another alleged rioter was "attending basic training for the United States Air Force" at the time of an August 2021 interview with the FBI following his alleged participation in the January 6 attack.</p> <p>In all, at least 36 have served in the Marine Corps, 28 in the Army, three in the Navy, and five in the Air Force.</p> <p>The active-duty Marine Marine Major Chris Warnagiris is the only active duty member of the military to have been charged for participating in the January 6 Capitol attack so far.</p> <p>Investigators say in their Statement of Facts that Warnagiris was the first among a group of rioters to "push himself through" the doors of the Capitol East Rotunda, where officers are said to have just "lost ground" to rioters already inside the building who were attempting to prop open the doors.</p> <p>Once Warnagiris was inside, other rioters followed, "one by one," prosecutors also said, each fighting and pushing their way past officers attempting to guard the Capitol entrance.</p> <p>Warnagiris pulled people from the mob inside as he positioned himself in the corner of the doorway, using his body to keep the door open, according to the government's initial charging documents.</p> <p>When a U.S. Capitol Police officer tried to shut the doors of the building, Warnagiris allegedly resisted and instead pushed the officer away to keep the door open, according to investigators' review of security and open-source videos from that day that is described in court documents.</p>

A subsequent FBI interview with the officer in question, also described in the court documents, revealed that, after being shown a screenshot of one of the videos, the officer "recalled trying to push [Warnagiris] out of the way" and Warnagiris "pushing him back in an effort to maintain his position in the open door."

The Marine "is not accused of anything more physical or dangerous than pushing back," his legal defense team argued in documents filed with the court. They also pointed to the FBI interview, where the officer said he "did not realize [Warnagiris] was fighting to push the door open until he saw the screen shot" from the video of the alleged incident.

Warnagiris has pleaded not guilty to multiple violent crimes, including assaulting or impeding officers at the Capitol, and now faces a superseding indictment.

Warnagiris has been a Marine since 2002 and was most recently stationed at Camp Quantico, in Virginia. A Board of Inquiry was held at Marine Corps Base Quantico earlier this year for Warnagiris to argue his case to stay in the Marine Corps. The outcome is pending.

The Army specialist who enlisted after the January 6 attack

Army Specialist James Mault's case is unusual in that he enlisted *after* his alleged participation in the January 6 attack. He was [taken into custody](#) on the morning of Thursday, October 7 at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina, according to a spokesman for the base. The Army said in October that it was not aware of Mault's participation, and the Army would continue to work closely with the FBI when making enlistment decisions. According to charging documents, the FBI had interviewed Mault about his participation in the rioting in mid-January.

Mault, who was 29 at the time of his arrest, joined the Army in May and was serving as a combat engineer. He had previously been a Patriot operator in the Army before he left active duty with the rank of sergeant in 2016. From 2016 to March 2020, he was a combat engineer in the New York Army National Guard.

According to the charging documents, Mault admitted that he had traveled to Washington, D.C. for former President Trump's January 6 rally with five friends and told investigators he had worn a distinctive hard hat "because he was aware of ANTIFA attacking Trump supporters after events in Washington." He said he thought the hat would offer some protection. The FBI said there was no indication that ANTIFA was involved in the January 6 attack.

Mault has been charged with multiple crimes related to his alleged actions on January 6, including one count of assaulting, resisting, or impeding certain officers with a dangerous weapon and one count of engaging in physical violence in a restricted building or grounds with a deadly or dangerous weapon.

In that January FBI interview, court documents explain, "Mault described being caught up in the crowd and the mass of people pushed him closer and closer to the Capitol Building. Mault claimed to have no choice but to move forward because of the press of people behind him."

Investigators say that Capitol security and body-worn cameras and publicly available videos collected from that day show Mault and his co-defendant, Cody Mattice, "confronting law enforcement officers at a barrier leading up to the Capitol" and apparently climbing high above the crowd before pointing canisters at law enforcement, spraying them with the contents.

In an FBI interview, Mault "acknowledged witnessing law enforcement officers being assaulted and property destruction," but he has denied assaulting anyone or damaging property during the attack. He has entered a plea of not guilty.

The Marine veteran accused of assaulting police with a Marine Corps flag

Thomas Webster, a Marine Corps veteran and retired New York City Police Department officer, has been indicted on multiple counts, including assaulting a police officer with a large metal flagpole carrying a red U.S. Marine Corps flag attached to it. According to investigators' Statement of Facts, Webster yelled at the

officer "You f***ing piece of shit. You f***ing Commie motherf***ers, man," and then lunged towards him with the metal flagpole.

Investigators describe in charging documents a violent struggle between the former Marine and the officer, alleging videos show Webster tackled the officer to the ground before further assaulting him.

"Webster can be seen pinning [the officer] to the ground and straddling him while he tries to forcibly remove [his] face shield and gas mask," court documents say.

During an FBI interview following the assault, the officer who was allegedly attacked by Webster described the violence, explaining he was "choked by his chin strap and was unable to breathe during this portion of the assault," the court documents also explain.

Investigators say they later identified the veteran in part by interviewing an administrator at the school his child attends. The school said he "regularly drops his child off school," court documents revealed.

Webster, who recently faced a second superseding indictment, has pleaded not guilty to all charges and is scheduled to stand trial for his alleged role in the Capitol attack in April.

According to court documents on the public docket, Webster intends to use body camera and publicly available videos to argue at trial that he was acting in self-defense on January 6, alleging "excessive force was used against him" by the officer, "prior to any act or allegation" for which Webster is charged.

Defense Department response

The Defense Department didn't respond to a request for comment on this report. However, alarmed by the involvement of veterans and military service members in the assault on the Capitol, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [ordered a one-day stand down](#) in the spring to discuss extremism and subsequently formed the [Counter Extremism Working Group](#). It has been tasked with updating the Pentagon's definition of extremist activity and adding [training on extremist groups that might try to recruit former service members](#), as well as transition checklists for those leaving military service. The group is also standardizing entrance questionnaires to root out applicants with previous extremist behavior.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/15 US sanctions Brazil top drug gangs
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-treasury-targets-brazils-top-drug-gang-sanctions-81778199
GIST	<p>SAO PAULO -- The U.S. Treasury on Wednesday imposed sanctions on people and businesses connected to drug trafficking gangs, including the biggest criminal organization in Brazil, known as the PCC.</p> <p>The move stems from new authority designated under an executive order from President Joe Biden "to target any foreign person engaged in drug trafficking activities, regardless of whether they are linked to a specific kingpin or cartel," the Treasury said in a statement.</p> <p>The PCC is one of the 10 individuals and 15 entities targeted in four countries, including China's Shanghai Fast-Fine Chemicals and Mexico's Los Rojos criminal group, among others. People and companies linked to the targets could be stopped from using the U.S. financial system, said Brian Nelson, Treasury undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence.</p> <p>"We will continue working closely with our partners to reduce threats from these groups and disrupt their business models," Nelson was quoted as saying in the statement.</p> <p>The PCC was founded in the prisons of wealthy Sao Paulo state and remains dominant there. It has expanded its reach into other Brazilian states, plus elsewhere in South America and abroad.</p>

	<p>Security experts in Brazil say the PCC's leadership sees violence as a hindrance to their business model in major cities, but are open to using when they feel it is needed.</p> <p>That has been the case many times in neighboring Paraguay, a country that is key for the PCC's routes for smuggling cocaine and marijuana. The Brazilian gang has been involved in multiple killings in border towns in recent years as it seeks to seize complete control.</p> <p>The latest violent incident in the region linked to the PCC came in October, with four people killed by dozens of shots in the Paraguayan city of Pedro Juan Caballero. One of them was the daughter the local governor. Local police said at the time the Brazilian gang was involved.</p> <p>The PCC is "the most powerful organized crime group in Brazil and among the most powerful in the world," the Treasury's statement said. It "has forged a bloody path to dominance through drug trafficking, as well as money laundering, extortion, murder-for-hire, and drug debt collection."</p> <p>Brazil's foreign ministry did not reply to an emailed request from The Associated Press seeking comment on the U.S. action.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/15 Derek Chauvin guilty plea federal charges
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/derek-chauvin-pleads-guilty-federal-charges-violating-george/story?id=81766309
GIST	<p>Eight months after being convicted of state murder charges in the death of George Floyd, former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pleaded guilty on Wednesday to federal charges of violating the 46-year-old Black man's civil rights.</p> <p>"At this time, guilty, your honor," Chauvin, wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, said in Minnesota U.S. District Court in St. Paul when questioned by Judge Paul Magnuson.</p> <p>The 45-year-old Chauvin, who is already serving a 22 1/2-year state prison sentence for killing Floyd in May 2020, could get additional time behind bars when he is sentenced at a later date.</p> <p>Federal prosecutors are asking that Chauvin be sentenced to up to 25 years in federal prison. The federal sentence is to be served concurrently with the state sentence, according to the plea agreement Chauvin signed in court.</p> <p>Floyd's brothers Terrence, Rodney and Philonise Floyd, along with their nephew, Brandon Williams, were in the courtroom when Chauvin pleaded guilty.</p> <p>"Honestly, hearing what Derek Chauvin said in the courtroom is not what we definitely wanted. We wanted this at the beginning of the trial (back in March)," Rodney Floyd said at a news conference following the plea hearing. "My reaction is not what you'd expect. I'm still feeling the anger I felt in the beginning."</p> <p>Philonise Floyd added, "We can never get justice because we can never get George back."</p> <p>Attorneys for the Floyd family, Ben Crump, Antonio Romanucci and Jeff Storms, released a joint statement, saying: "As our nation continues to grapple with the demons of our past and present, historic days make us hopeful for our future. Today is one such day."</p> <p>The statement adds: "Before the tragic and needless death of George Floyd, there was little expectation that a white police officer would ever be held accountable for murdering a Black man. But when Derek Chauvin was held to account, the jury – and people across the country – finally said enough was enough."</p> <p>A federal grand jury in May indicted Chauvin and three other police officers -- Tou Thao, 35, J. Alexander Kueng, 27, and Thomas Lane, 38 in connection to Floyd's death.</p>

The four men were scheduled to go to trial in federal court together in January.

All four defendants were charged with depriving Floyd of his constitutional right to be free from the use of unreasonable force when they held the handcuffed man on the ground on May 25, 2020, and Chauvin dug his knee into Floyd's neck and back for more than nine minutes even as Floyd complained he could not breathe, fell unconscious and lost a pulse.

The indictment alleges Thao and Kueng willfully failed to intervene to stop Chauvin's use of unreasonable force.

Lane was heard on body-camera footage played at Chauvin's state trial this year suggesting that Floyd be turned on his side to alleviate his breathing.

Lane, Kueng and Thao are also scheduled to go on trial on state charges in March 2022 on state charges of aiding and abetting second-degree murder and aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter. They have all pleaded not guilty.

According to a statement from the U.S. Department of Justice, Chauvin "admitted that he continued to use force even though he was aware that Mr. Floyd had stopped resisting, talking and moving, and even though he was aware that Mr. Floyd had lost consciousness and a pulse."

Chauvin also admitted, according to the DOJ statement, that he willfully violated Floyd's constitutional right not to be deprived of liberty without due process of law, which included his right to be free from a police officer's deliberate indifference to his serious medical needs.

"While recognizing that nothing can repair the harm caused by such acts, the Justice Department is committed to holding accountable those who violate the Constitution, and to safeguarding the civil rights of all Americans," U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement.

Under the terms of the plea deal, Chauvin will serve his sentence in federal custody and will not be eligible to work in any law enforcement capacity following his release.

In a separate federal indictment, Chauvin also pleaded guilty to willfully depriving a 14-year-old Minneapolis resident of his constitutional right to be free from the use of unreasonable force by a police officer. The charges stem from an episode in September 2017 and allege that Chauvin, without legal justification, held the teenager by the throat, struck him multiple times in the head with a flashlight and held his knee on the boy's neck and the upper back while he was handcuffed and in a prone position.

"After hearing the details of it, that guy (Chauvin) is a monster," Brandon Williams, Floyd's nephew, said of the brutality case involving the teenager. "He should have been arrested in 2017. Had he been held accountable for what he did in 2017 to that minor, George Floyd would still be here."

In April, Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter stemming from Floyd's death, which prompted protests nationwide.

Matthew Barhoma, a Los Angeles criminal appeals attorney, said Chauvin change-of-plea will likely not help Thao, Kueng and Lane.

"Prosecutors will be able to inform jurors in the case against the other officers that Chauvin pleaded guilty, which will reflect badly on those defendants," Barhoma said in a statement to ABC News.

[Return to Top](#)

If you no longer wish to receive this report, please submit an email to intake@wsfc.wa.gov and enter UNSUBSCRIBE InFOCUS in the Subject line.

DISCLAIMER - the articles highlighted within InFOCUS is for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Fusion Center, the City of Seattle, the Seattle Police Department or the Washington State Patrol and have been included only for ease of reference and academic purposes.

FAIR USE Notice All rights to these copyrighted items are reserved. Articles and graphics have been placed within for educational and discussion purposes only, in compliance with 'Fair Use' criteria established in Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. The principle of 'Fair Use' was established as law by Section 107 of The Copyright Act of 1976. 'Fair Use' legally eliminates the need to obtain permission or pay royalties for the use of previously copyrighted materials if the purposes of display include 'criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research.' Section 107 establishes four criteria for determining whether the use of a work in any particular case qualifies as a 'fair use'. A work used does not necessarily have to satisfy all four criteria to qualify as an instance of 'fair use'. Rather, 'fair use' is determined by the overall extent to which the cited work does or does not substantially satisfy the criteria in their totality. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. For more information go to: [≤http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml)

THIS DOCUMENT MAY CONTAIN COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. COPYING AND DISSEMINATION IS PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

Source: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

[Return to Top](#)